WESTERN ACTION

2 BIG NOVELS

OCT. 15c

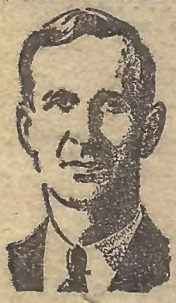
HELL-TOWN SHOWDOWN

by WILLIAM COLT MACDONALD

RETURN OF THE GUN CUB

by JAMES ROURKE

1939



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WESTERN ACTION

2 BIG NOVELS

Vol. V, No. 5 *October, 1939*

TWO BIG ACTION NOVELS

HELL-TOWN SHOWDOWN ..... ***William Colt MacDonald*** **8**

Quirt Carlyle knew that cows don't have wings, and therefore those missing herds of the Lazy T hadn't flown into Mexico. And he knew too, that Dan Hastings of the Rocking H had been a back shooting sidewinder, up north in Montana, and a skunk never changes his smell . . . But he didn't know that some day he'd meet Hastings through gunsmoke, and hot lead would write of a new destiny for that renegade ruled corner of Brimstone Range!

RETURN OF THE GUN CUB ..... ***James Rourke*** **64**

Range war, range ruin, range lust! It was the old cruel story of the West, when the law was young and powerless . . . Backed by bushwhack guns the renegade legions had wiped out the honest hard-working small ranchers and taken their spreads for themselves . . . Grim-lipped, slab-muscled Rusty Barnes knew this story, knew it only too well . . . for Rusty's father had been one of the first to fight the range-hogs, and one of the last to fall before their guns!

A SMASHING NOVELET

DESTINY'S BACK TRAIL ..... ***Wayne D. Overholser*** **106**

When Slim Winters sided the Tumalo sheriff, he did not know that the lawman had posted a reward bulletin for him—dead or alive!

A THRILLING SHORT STORY

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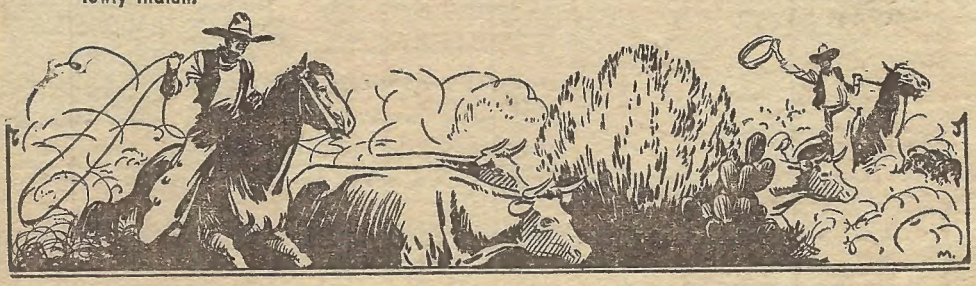
A story of one of the best known figures of the old West.

A TRUE ARTICLE OF THE OLD WEST

LO, THE POOR MILLIONAIRES! **63**

Wherein the gun-greed of the early settlers of the Old West made millionaires of the lowly Indian.



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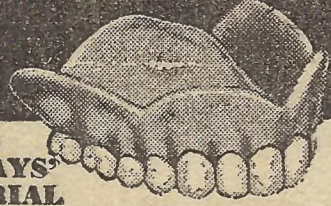

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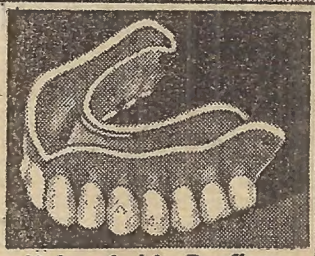

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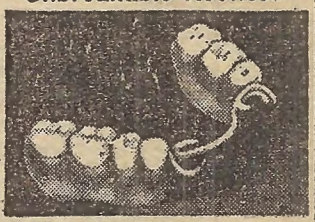

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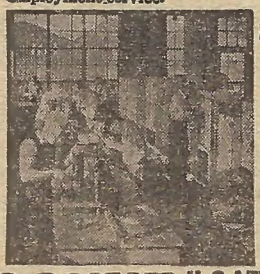

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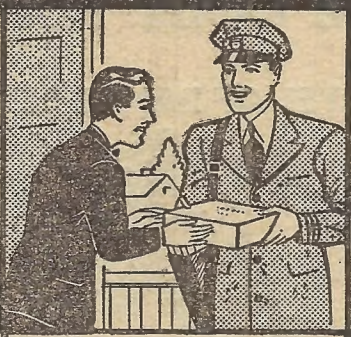

Then one day I saw this ad on Short Stature and Height Increase. I answered it at once. Then things happened. I became a new man.

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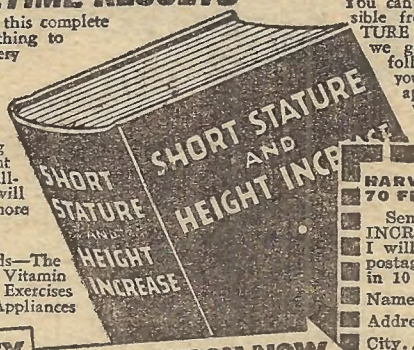

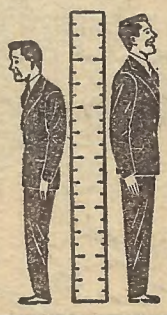

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HELL-TOWN SHOWDOWN

by WILLIAM COLT MACDONALD

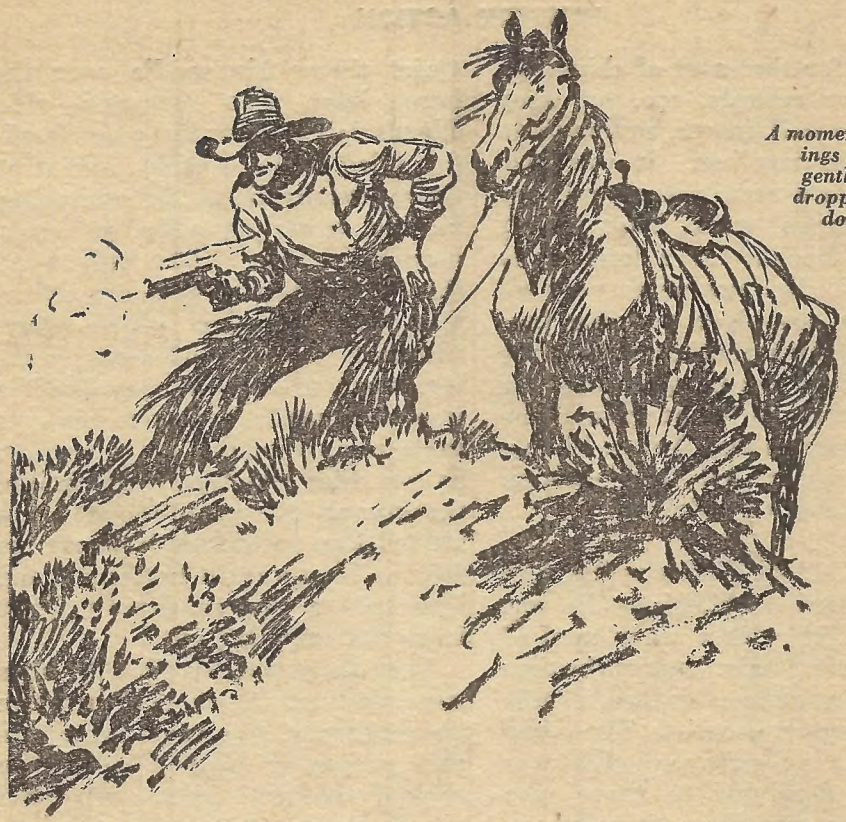
A SMASHING NOVEL OF RANGE BEYOND THE LAW!!

CHAPTER I

MOSTLY, it was the bad weather that brought things to a head between Quirt Carlyle and "Black Dan" Hastings. From the start of the round-up it had been one of those drizzly, nasty autumns with trouble of one kind or another from the time that the cook of the L-Wing beat the pan for breakfast until, shivering and soaked through to the skin, the weary cow-hands crawled between blankets that, despite tarpaulins, seemed to reek with dampness.

Old "Weasel" Elwing, owner of the outfit, was always meaner than

10-8-39



A moment Hastings swayed gently, then dropped face downward

Quirt Carlyle knew that cows don't have wings, and therefore those missing herds of the Lazy T hadn't flown into Mexico. And he knew, too, that Dan Hastings of the Rocking H had been a back shooting sidewinder up north in Montana, and a skunk never changes his smell. . . . But he didn't know that some day he'd meet Hastings through gunsmoke and hot lead would write of a new destiny for that renegade ruled corner of Brimstone Range!

a sidewinder during round-up, and usually spent a deal of his time cursing out the cow-hands and urging them to greater efforts, although he knew down in his heart that every man in the crew was giving all he had to get the outfit back to winter quarters before cold weather set in. Elwing knew they'd do it, too, but it was his way to nag and growl at the boys until they were fighting mad. He'd an idea that a fighting outfit worked harder.

That was Elwing: Pay the least wages possible and then scheme to get two men's work out of every puncher on the payroll. With the single exception of Hastings, who had worked on and off for the L-Wing for several years, nobody ever stayed with Old Elwing more than one season.

Hastings was a big, hulking frame of a man with the sort of muscles that go along way in bulldogging a steer in championship time. He had

a record for that sort of thing. He held other records, too, but they weren't so well known, having to do with cattle rustling. It was also hinted that a certain bank robbery was Hastings' work. That wasn't verified, though, for a long while afterward. Dan was never very sociable and his black scowling face held something that prevented the curious from asking questions. He was part Cree in the bargain. Some held the opinion that Weasel Elwing was his father, but that question never was settled definitely.

QUIRT CARLYLE was the very antithesis of Hastings. He was tall and slim with a wavy mop of reddish-brown hair. Most of the time there was a smile on his face, a smile showing even white teeth. There was a mild look in his gray eyes that was certainly deceiving to those who didn't know him. Even his voice was misleading. It was cool and drawling and seemed always to hold a bit of laugh, although those who knew him well could tell there was a difference in the sort of laugh his voice carried. Sometimes it was cheerful and whole-souled as all outdoors in springtime; at other times it held something of the quality of sunshine glittering on ice.

The trouble between Quirt and Dan Hastings had commenced early in the spring when Quirt first joined the L-Wing. Hastings, although top-rider at the time, had failed to ride Devilfish, the meanest piece of horse-flesh that ever stretched a throw-rope. After Dan had been pitched head foremost to the ground, the boys picked him up and set him down against the corral fence to "come to." Through the haze of his returning consciousness Dan saw Quirt throw his saddle over the horse, leap on its back and—*ride.* Words fail to describe what Devilfish tried to do to Quirt, and what Quirt actually did to that squirming, kicking, squealing coiled-spring in horsehide. *Ride* is the only word that adequately covers the affair. The easy way in which Quirt "fanned" Devilfish off across country, when the preliminary bucking was over, made Dan open his eyes to the realization that his reputation as top-rider was fast slipping into the discard. The rest of the punchers kidded Dan considerably about his failure. That was the beginning, and Dan held a grudge against Quirt from that moment on.

Then there was the time the boys were playing "freeze-out" down in the bunkhouse. Dan was playing safe and preparing himself against a time of need with an ace concealed up his sleeve. As it happened the ace "went sour" on him, and Quirt detected him in the act of switching the cards. Dan tried to explain it as an accident, but Quirt laughed in his face. Then Dan reached for his six-gun, but before he could complete the move Quirt dived across the table, wrenched the gun from Dan's hand and threw it into a corner. For a moment it appeared as though Dan would try to finish the affair with his fists, but something in Quirt's eyes decided him otherwise. He turned suddenly and went, snarling, through the door, Quirt still laughing when he left. That fanned the flame of Dan's hate, and the whole outfit knew something was due to break before long. Then the fall round-up commenced and everybody was too busy to waste any time on personal grudges.

The weather that fall was enough

to make a saint turn devil. The nerves of every man in the outfit were stretched to the snapping point, and if one waddie asked another for his "makin's" he usually received a growl with the sack of Durham. Everyone's temper was at hair-trigger tension. All except Quirt's. He'd come into camp long after dark, with the water dripping from his sombrero, but the flash of teeth from his smile was never absent. While the rest were damning the day they were born, Quirt would be whistling *My Lulu Gal* in a cheerful undertone.

One morning towards the end of the round-up, cookie's "Come on an' get it, or I'll throw it away" roused the boys to the fact that the weather was unusually mean. A wet snow was falling and turning the ground into a slushy mass of slippery mud. The wind was raw, too, and cut right through to the bone. Plenty of cursing accompanied the actions of the men as they crawled reluctantly out of blankets, buckled on chaps, and thrust cold feet into stiff boots.

"Come on, ye lazy rannies," Old Weasel's voice snarled through the snow-driven gloom. "Be ye a-goin' to sleep all day?" That was Weasel's way. There wasn't the faintest sign of dawn yet.

Grumbling, growling, the boys dragged their weary way up to the fire, hungrier than a pack of coyotes after a hard winter. Quirt Carlyle was there first and stood holding a cup of steaming Java in one hand and a biscuit in the other, when the rest arrived.

"Well, yuh little rays of sunshine," he greeted them, the slow smile coming through his grin, "are yuh aimin' to pick violets this mornin' or is this th' day yuh sit home at th' piano an' take your music lesson?"

A couple of the men laughed feebly; the rest didn't answer. Then Dan Hastings' voice came across the Dutch oven. "Violets, hell!" he said profanely. "Yuh think you're almighty comical, don't yuh, Carlyle?"

"Who, me? Comical?" Quirt answered genially. "I ain't near so comical as the galoot that poured his coffee cup full outta cookie's pot of his grease. Them pots look th' same, but they's a difference in th' contents. Don't be so hoggish, cowboy. Wait your turn an' yuh'll get a chance at th' pot."

Dan hastily inspected his cup and then set it down with a slam as Quirt finished with a snicker, "I reckon, though, that hogs generally do run to grease."

There was a general laugh at this and everybody except Dan felt better. He muttered something to himself and glared savagely at Quirt. Nothing would have come of it ordinarily, but with the weather putting everyone's feelings on edge, and added to that the fact that Dan already hated Quirt like poison, the affair rather stuck in the man's craw.

By the time breakfast was finished and cigarette rolled, the first tinge of daylight began to gray the eastern sky, and the boys ambled down to the remuda to cut out their horses. That's where the trouble broke. It's difficult enough to rope a particular horse out of a bunch in the darkness, but add to that the fact that the ropes were wet and had stiffened overnight, and it gives some sort of idea what kind of a proposition they were facing.

Quirt had been puttering around his blankets and said something about his gun being gone, but no one had seen it, and in a few minutes he came down to the corral and began to spread his loop.

A FEW twirls and the noose went flying from his hand in the direction of his horse; then he felt the rope tighten. At the same instant there came from Dan Hastings a series of curses, and as Quirt threw his weight on the rope a heavy body struck the ground! Mistakes like that will happen sometimes in the darkness, and it chanced that Quirt's loop had settled around Dan's shoulders and yanked him out of the saddle.

Came the sound of more profanity as Dan slipped off the rope, then Quirt's voice came clear through the noises of the horses milling around and Dan's cursing.

"I'm plumb sorry that happened," Dan," Quirt was apoligizing regretfully, "but yuh know how it is in th' dark this-a-way—"

"Yuh lie, you ——" roared Dan's voice, thick with rage. Then followed more words, most of them casting aspersions on Quirt's parentage. "Yuh did it a-purpose, yuh ——" followed a vile string of epithets.

There was a rush and the sound of gloved knuckles meeting the bone and flesh of a jaw, and Dan sprawled down into the gumbo a second time.

"I apologized to yuh, but as that didn't seem to square matters," Quirt was drawling coolly, "mebbe I can knock some sense into your thick head."

Old Elwing, accompanied by a couple of punchers, came running up to separate them. Now that the day's work had commenced, he didn't want any time lost in fighting. Before they could get there, Dan's .45 crashed out, and in the red glare from the weapon they saw Quirt stagger back.

A moment Quirt hesitated; then he hurled himself at Dan. Silence save for the sound of stumbling feet in slippery mud. . . . Again the crimson flare and the vicious roar of the six-shooter. Quirt's head snapped back . . . his knees sagged. The darkness . . . silence again for a brief moment. Next the excited movements of startled horses.

In a few moments, the camp was in an uproar. Somebody dragged Quirt's body out from under the hoofs that were cutting wildly into the slushy turf. For a while it looked as though the horses would break through the rope-corral and stampede. Eventually they were quieted down, and Quirt was carried back to the fire, where someone poured some whiskey down his throat. After a few minutes his eyes opened, then a wisp of smile twitched his white lips. He was breathing with difficulty, a wheezing sound coming with each expelling of breath.

"Ye danged fool!" Old Elwing was swearing at Dan. "What'd yuh do that for? Ye know we need every hand we got. This makes us one short. Quirt like as not'll be dead before daylight."

"Yuh're goin' to be two hands short, to say nothin' of th' buckboard," Shorty Gordon broke in. "I'm takin' Quirt to a doctor just as soon as I can get'm there. He *might* have a chance."

For a second Elwing looked as if about to object; but when he looked at the other men's faces, he saw the

cards were stacked against him. Particularly so, as one or two mentioned something about turning Dan over to the sheriff.

"It wasn't my fault," Dan whined. "I see him start for his gun an' I knew it was him or me—"

"That's a lie, Dan, an' yuh know it," Quirt's voice came weakly from the blanket where he lay stretched out. He was a bit stronger now, but little flecks of red were blowing out on his chest as he talked. "I know now—where my gun went. Yuh was afraid — to face me — open an' square-like—but I'm goin' to fool yuh. Some day I'm comin' back—an' we'll settle—this matter—more equal—I'm thinkin'."

As he finished speaking, Quirt's head jerked queerly to one side and his eyelids fluttered. Even then there was a faint smile on his lips.

Faint streaks of light were beginning to shift down through the lower ridges, and the cruel winds were filling the hollows with drifting snow when Shorty Gordon started out in the buckboard with his unconscious burden, on what seemed a hopeless journey.

CHAPTER II

BUT Quirt didn't die. By some miracle and the aid of a rugged constitution he pulled through after a long siege at the hospital in Cheyenne. When he was discharged by the doctors nearly a year later he immediately made tracks back to the L-Wing.

Meanwhile, Dan Hastings had made a getaway and old Elwing didn't know, or wouldn't tell Quirt, where he'd gone. For the next couple of years or so Quirt worked around on various outfits in Wyoming and Montana.

As time passed, much of his animosity toward Dan Hastings wore off. Holding a grudge was the last thing that Quirt Carlyle would do. For him the past held little, and in the clearing away of all mental rubbish there remained in his mind no space devoted to petty hatreds. "What's done is done, an' we'll forget it." That was Quirt's philosophy.

Nevertheless, one day when he got word that Hastings had drifted down towards the Southwestern ranges, Quirt made preparations for departing. Mostly, it was just a school-boyish desire to once again laugh in Hastings' face, that prompted the move. Nothing more, except that his roving spirit required a new setting.

By this time Quirt had paid off the debts that had piled up during his stay in hospital; so he finished up with a bunch of horses he'd taken a contract to gentle down, rolled up his slicker, and started south. The Mexican border was nearly reached before he stopped for any length of time.

A late afternoon sun was painting the tops of the adobe houses a brilliant red when Quirt rode into Kirktown one day several weeks after he had shaken the dust of Montana from his boots. Kirktown was the typical cow-town of the times. The greater portion of the buildings were nothing but 'dobe huts; but there were also a few frame buildings, chief among which was a combination saloon, dance hall and gambling parlor. Here the cow-hands from the neighboring ranches came to gamble and drink up their *dinero* on pay-day night. Next in promi-

nence was the general store, a small bank, and a shack at one end of a rudely constructed platform near the shipping-pens and railroad tracks. The shack was spoken of as "The Depot," for trains *occasionally* stopped at Kirktown.

Being just across the border from Mexico, Kirktown drew quite a number of greasers and breeders. On top of the fact that most of these comprised a pretty tough crowd, the no-good punchers from the surrounding country also used the town as a headquarters. In short, it was the sort of town that caters to the scum of the cow-country.

Quirt loped his horse along the dusty, wheel-rutted street until he reached a large building with a huge sign swinging above the double doors. The sign bore in straggling letters the legend:

INTERNASHUNAL HOUSE
Drink, Dance and Deal

Here he dismounted and after fastening the horse at the hitch-rack, sauntered inside. At one end of the room a squeaky violin and tin-panny piano on a raised platform, savagely seduced and violated *The Blue Danube* waltz, that spurred and booted feet might accompany short-skirted, spangle-bedecked figures in the intricacies of the dance. Along one side ran a long bar crowded deep with thirsty patrons, while through a doorway at the other side Quirt could see green baize-covered tables upon which cards were being dealt in orderly array.

Above the orchestral din and the noise of shuffling feet came the shouts and ribald songs of the men at the bar. The atmosphere of the room was stuffy and close from the dust of the dance floor and the drifting smoke from burning tobacco.

Making his way around the dance floor, Quirt pushed his way through the crowd lined at the bar and ordered a bottle of beer. A beetle-browed bartender scrutinized him intently for a moment, then swabbed clean with a greasy rag a place on the mahogany, and placed bottle and glass before him.

Quirt raised the beer to his lips and then turned and surveyed the crowd, making a mental note as his eyes swept the room, to the effect that it was a "no-good" bunch.

At one end of the bar stood a tall, blonde individual talking drunkenly to a Mexican standing at his side. Quirt gathered from the accent that reached his ears from time to time, that the man was English. The Englishman was clad in riding-breeches and boots, above which was a flannel shirt. A stiff-brimmed hat was clinging to the back of his head. *Clinging* is used, because at every movement of the intoxicated man it threatened to fall to the floor.

QUIRT surveyed him with amusement for a few minutes as the Englishman made frantic efforts to keep an eye-glass in place. Then he turned back to his beer. At that moment a voice at his side interrupted with:

"Say, cowboy, yuh're a stranger around here, ain't yuh?"

Quirt swung around to find confronting him a medium-sized man who was chiefly noticeable for his lack of chin. For a moment Quirt stared amusedly into the watery blue eyes, then, "Reckon I must be, if yuh don't recognize me, mister," he drawled gently with a slow smile.

"What's your business in Kirktown?" the fellow asked next, striving to impart a note of sharpness to the question.

"Not yours — that's certain," Quirt smiled a second time.

At the answer the man puffed up and endeavored to appear important. "Looky here, young feller, don't you be a-gettin' fresh with me," he blustered. "I'll have yuh know that th' citizens of Kirktown has elected me to be sheriff." As the words left his lips he motioned to a large, nickel star fastened to his vest.

"Yeah?" Quirt's raised eyebrows expressed surprise, then he continued, "Well, some folks has a fancy for keepin' pets, so it don't surprise me none. What's on your mind?"

The sheriff was growing more angry every minute. "Jest this: They's a rule in this town that strangers has to deposit their weapons with th' sheriff until they leaves. Yuh better hand over your gun."

A humorous sparkle appeared in Quirt's eyes and he continued to bait the sheriff a little longer. "Is that so?" he drawled. "It don't mean nothin', though, does it? 'Cause if it does, I ain't figgerin' on complyin' with your law none—leastwise not so long as I see th' rest of these waddies packin' their hardware. Think it over, Sheriff. Yuh really don't want my shootin'-iron. Better have a shot of red-eye, instead." He turned to the beetle-browed dispenser of drinks, "Hey, barkeep, me an' little Rollo here craves to try some of your likker."

"Well, if yuh put it that way," the sheriff acquiesced weakly as the bartender served up two glasses, "only yuh see, mister, bein' sheriff I gotta be careful who comes into town wearin' guns." He raised his glass and downed the drink, then, "Le's have another. Got lots o' money, ain't yuh?"

"Listen, figgerhead," Quirt smiled, "just between you 'n me, yuh don't count for a damn in this town, do yuh? Ain't it true that they just elected yuh for th' sake of havin' a sheriff? I reckon yuh don't stand for nothin' in particular, an' if yuh think yuh're goin' to sponge any more drinks off 'n me, yuh got another guess comin'. If yuh want more, buy 'm yourself!"

"Say—say——" sputtered the sheriff, when a commotion at the end of the bar cut him short.

QUIRT heard a series of curses in mixed Spanish and English, then a space cleared as a Mexican went sprawling to the floor. Over him weaved the drunken Englishman, feet stumbling and fists clenched for further action.

"Look here, old chappie!" the Englishman was saying maudlinly in his broad accents, "we don't stand for such dirty blighters as you in my country, y'know. Get up, and I'll give you more of the same."

"There's a job for you, Sheriff," Quirt suggested, as he turned, only to find that the sheriff had, strangely enough, disappeared.

By this time the Mexican had gained his feet, but the Britisher, drunk as he was, crossed the floor and downed him with another well-directed right to the jaw. This time the greaser stayed down. There was a menacing movement from the crowd as it began to close in on the doughty upholder of his country's dignity. For a few moments things

looked black and Quirt decided to take a hand.

Pushing his way through the circle that surrounded the Englishman, Quirt walked up to him, saying, " 'Pears to me Johnnie Bull, that mebbe yuh can stand some reinforcements. I like your fightin' spirit, an' I'm for yuh."

With an effort the Englishman raised his bleary gaze from the unconscious Mexican on the floor to Quirt's face. Then he straightened up. "Aw! thanks!" The words came coolly, insolently, as he fixed the monocle in place. "But I haven't the slightest doubt but that I can handle this situation."

Quirt was taken aback. Then he laughed. "Suit yourself, ol'-timer; I don't reckon on hornin' in where I ain't wanted." He turned and started away when a movement from another Mexican in the crowd caught his eye.

Like a flash Quirt moved across the floor to intercept this new adversary. The Mexican, knife upraised, came on with a rush, behind the unsuspecting Englishman. Suddenly Quirt thrust out his foot and the Mexican stumbled and went sprawling on all fours, the knife clattering out of his hand.

"I reckon it's about time I took a hand in this game," Quirt's voice came through the din. "Whether or not this fightin' Englisher wants help, I figger he's too drunk to judge. If yuh'd play open an' square-like, I wouldn't have intruded this-a-way; but when yuh begin usin' knives on a man that ain't even got a gun, I figgers he needs all th' help he can get."

Quirt's hand hovered near his holster as he continued. "We're gettin' out right now, an' I'm suggestin' that nobody tries to stop us. I aims to throw some lead straight 'an accurate if yuh do." Without removing his eyes from the circle of dark faces that slowly milled away from him, he spoke to the Englishman, "C'mon, Johnnie, let's be driftin' on. I don't reckon we're so awful popular in this place."

"My name," the Englishman answered stiffly, "is not Johnnie. It's Stephen Vance." The sight of the knife had sobered him up a bit and the words, although thick, held a note of courtesy. "I find now I may have been a trifle hasty when you first offered your aid—a bit curt, y'know."

" 'Sall right, Stevie. Me, I'm Quirt Carlyle. And now that we're introduced, let's shake a leg outta here. We can clutch mitts later."

WARILY, with eyes and ears alert for the first hostile sign, Quirt, followed by Stephen Vance, made his way through the crowd, which parted reluctantly as they approached. In a moment the door was reached and they passed into the open air.

"Whew!" Quirt ejaculated when they were well away from the building. "I'm plumb gratified to get outta that hole with a complete skin. I was expectin' every minute to get plugged in th' back, but if I'd backed out they might've thought I was afraid an' started some gun-play. Where's your horse?"

Vance's horse was tethered not far away from Quirt's and a few minutes later the animals pounded out of town. The two men rode about three miles in silence, then Quirt drew rein.

It was beginning to grow dusk when they alighted under a clump of

greasewoods at the edge of the trail. Across the sagebrush-dotted plain, above a jagged ridge that raised itself abruptly towards the sky, there still shone a faint red glow, but back along the eastern horizon the first stars were already winking into the purple void.

So far Vance had had little to say, and now he stood silently by, watching Quirt as he gathered the brush and small twigs for a fire. In a few minutes a bed of coals was glowing, over which a fry-pan of cold beans was heated. Vance was sniffing the air with keen anticipation as the tang of sizzling bacon, mingled with the fragrant odor from the coffee pot, rose to his nostrils.

"There," Quirt announced, when the meal was ready. "We ain't got but one cup between us, an' we'll have to eat out of th' fry-pan, but throw that Java into yuh an' I reckon you'll feel better." He dropped to the ground and Vance followed him, taking a long draught from the cup of steaming black coffee before he spoke.

"I believe," Vance began, as he handed the cup to Quirt, "that I'm somewhat in your debt for getting me out of a nasty scrape back there." He pronounced it "nawsty," and all his other words were pronounced with a broad accent. "I really don't quite understand how I came to get—ah—spiffed in such fashion. The first drink I had seemed to affect me. Quite unusual, y'know."

"They probably doped your drink," Quirt suggested. "I reckon they figgered on gettin' yuh into a ruckus an' takin' your money off'n th' body. That crowd looked plumb bad to me. An' yuh don't owe me no thanks, neither. I been takin' a little vacation around this neck of the woods for some weeks now, an' a little excitement was right welcome. It ain't none of my business, but I'm plumb curious to know what yuh was doin' back there."

"To begin with," Vance explained, "I've been staying at the Lazy-T Ranch with the intention of buying it, providing I decide it can be made to produce the necessary return, or as you might say, revenue. Went into Kirktown to-day to get some tobacco for Jim Tegland—he owns the Lazy-T, y'know. Then I dropped into the International for a peg—ah—that is to say, a drink, and— Well, old dear, you know the rest of the story."

"Where's this Lazy-T?" Quirt asked, between bites. "Reckon they need any cow-hands? I gotta get me a job plumb sudden if I expect to eat reg'lar."

"The ranch," Vance explained, "is about thirty miles north along this trail. I don't believe Mr. Tegland will hire you, though. However, it'll do no harm to approach him on the subject. Y'see, the ranch isn't a paying proposition at present. Losing too many cattle."

"Fever?"

"No, they seem jolly well cared for, but according to Mr. Tegland, his herd is dwindling rapidly——"

"Oh, rustlers?"

"Quite so. I believe that's what Mr. Tegland called it."

Quirt pricked up his ears. Wherever rustlers were active, there might be found Dan Hastings.

"Such things has been known to happen," Quirt remarked dryly, then he asked, "What other cow-outfits is there around here?"

Vance considered a few minutes. "I'm really not familiar enough in

this vicinity to pass on that question," he answered at last, "although I've heard Mr. Tegland mention a few—the Bar-Slash-3, Circle-Square, Bleeding-Heart, Bar-H, Rafter-M, and several others. Oh, yes, there's the Rocking-Chair outfit, too," he finished, scooping a forkful of beans out of the frying-pan.

For a time the men sat eating and silently watching the moon as it climbed from behind a low pinion-covered ridge. At last Quirt sighed with well-being and took out his sack of tobacco which he passed to Vance, more as a courtesy than with the expectation that it would be accepted.

To his surprise the Englishman rolled the "makin's" into a paper and handed back the sack. Quirt said nothing directly, but he mentally commented on the ease with which Vance had rolled his smoke.

"Been in this part of th' country long?" Quirt asked, scraping the grease out of the fry-pan and emptying the coffee grounds onto the fire.

"I've been in the States about a year," Vance answered. "Just came out West about three months ago."

Quirt looked sharply at the man for a moment, but Vance was gazing into the red embers of the fire and took no note of the glance Quirt shot at him. Quirt decided right then that there was something wrong. No man with only three months in the cow-country would roll cigarettes as deftly as did Vance. He had the typical cowboy's touch.

Finally Vance rose and started for his horse. "I'll be getting along, now," he announced.

"Why don't yuh stop here with me to-night," Quirt invited. 'I got two blankets. Then I'll ride over with yuh in th' mornin' an' see will Tegland give me a job. Thirty miles is a plumb long ride some times, an' I aims to get some sleep to-night."

"Why, that will be top-hole, old chap," Vance accepted. "I'll stay gladly."

Once more he dropped down by the fire. Quirt didn't want company so much as he wanted an opportunity to study the Englishman. However, his curiosity availed him little. Vance showed small inclination to talk about himself, and an hour or so later they were both rolled in blankets, sleeping soundly.

CHAPTER III

BREAKFAST over the following morning, the two men mounted and started for the Lazy-T. Quirt questioned his companion regarding the country and surrounding ranches, but Vance seemed to know little, or wouldn't impart such knowledge as he had, it seemed to Quirt. The man was strangely untalkative when Quirt questioned him regarding rustlers and their activities around the Lazy-T country.

It was nearly noon when they reached the old wagon road that swung off the trail at right angles and led to the Lazy-T ranch buildings, which Quirt could see sprawled at the base of the foothills about a mile or so farther on.

As he drew nearer and rode through the gate that fronted the house, Quirt noticed that buildings and fences were badly in need of white-wash and repairs. A general rundown appearance prevailed.

The two men tied their horses and

Quirt followed Vance up the steps that led to the front door. Once inside he was introduced by the Englishman to Jim Tegland, owner of the Lazy-T, a man about fifty years of age. Quirt saw at once that Tegland wasn't well. His cheeks were sunken and there was about his face a gray pallor denoting that already the grim reaper's scythe was drawing close. However, Quirt noticed an indomitable something in the keen, gray eyes as Tegland rose when they were introduced. The formalities of introduction completed, Vance related their affair at the International House.

"The beggars might jolly well done me in, y'know," he finished, laughing. His tones were crisp, incisive, and to the point. "My thanks—due Mr. Carlyle—nick of time rescue, what?"

There was a frank look in Vance's blue eyes that was disarming, and in spite of certain suspicions that had made their way into Quirt's mind, he liked the man.

A few minutes later he departed and Quirt turned to Tegland. "I been wonderin', Mr. Tegland," Quirt began, "if mebbe yuh might have a job in your outfit for me."

Tegland didn't answer at once. Then he looked at Quirt. "Did I understand Vance to say that your name is Carlyle?" he asked.

"That's it."

"Any relation to Zach Carlyle what used to own the Three-Square outfit up in South Dakota?"

Quirt glanced up in surprise. "Yeah, he was my daddy. Why, did y'know him?"

TEGLAND started to answer, then broke into a paroxysm of coughing. "Dang this cough," he spoke between lung-scraping wheezes of breath, "ain't never been able to get over that attack of pneumony I had last winter." Then he continued, "So you're Zach Carlyle's younker. Know him? Why, son, Zach an' me was as close pards as two men can get until he died. You was jest a wee mite of a younker then, as I remember it. He didn't linger long after your ma died. What yuh been doin' all these years?"

"Oh, me, I been knockin' around th' country, pickin' up my cow-learnin'," Quirt answered.

"An' I'll bet yuh been doin' a right smart job of it, too." Tegland's eyes rested affectionately on Quirt for a few seconds. "Ye look a heap like your daddy did. No son of Zach's could go far wrong, I reckon." He talked of Quirt's father a few minutes longer, then swung back to the matter in question. "I don't rightly know what to say about givin' yuh a job, son. O' course I'll take yuh on. Couldn't refuse yuh, bein' who yuh are. Howsomever, I don't rightly know where to place yuh. Th' Lazy-T ain't doin' so well, an' things is kinda dull. Fact is, everythin' is kinda run inta th' ground since I got sick an' not able to 'tend things like I should."

"Me, I'm right good at repairin' fences an' such," Quirt suggested.

Tegland appeared to consider for a few minutes. "I don't know, though, but what yuh came about th' right time," he continued, disregarding Quirt's suggestion. "Maurine—that's my daughter; her ma's dead, too—had to hire a new foreman last winter when I was sick. Since then things ain't been goin' so well. Not that I'm blamin' th' gal—she done th' best she knew how; but

bein' a gal, she don't get the same results what a man could. As a foreman Brad Grimshaw seems all right, but somehow I don't put much trust in his ability. We been losin' too many cows, an' since he come th' situation ain't improved none."

"Vance said somethin' about rustlers," Quirt put in. "I asked him what other ranches they was around here, an' out of th' bunch it seemed to me that if it ain't independents doin' th' stealin', it'd be easier for th' Bar-H or Rocking-Chair outfits to change your brand into theirs, than it would any of the others. It'd be a plumb easy job of blottin'. In either case two marks with a runnin' iron'd make a Lazy-T cow into a Bar-H or Rocking-Chair critter. What do you know about them two outfits?"

"Th' Rocking-Chair is owned by Ed Wilson. Ed an' me had some trouble over some water rights back about three years ago, an' we ain't on such good terms, bein' as he ain't never forgive me. I ain't holdin' no grudge, though, an' I don't think Ed would descend to rustlin'. Yuh can't never tell, though."

Tegland shook his head dubiously and then continued, "Th' Bar-H seems like a pretty decent outfit, but I don't know much about them. It's owned by a coupla fellows. One of 'em, Lee Stillman, is an Easterner. He came out here about two years ago with some money, but not havin' no cattle experience he took in for a partner a puncher that showed up around these parts about that time. One furnished th' money, th' other th' experience. They bought th' old Diamond-S an' while they just had a few cows to begin with they've growed into a right sizable outfit by now. I don't know how come they changed th' brand to Bar-H, unless th' puncher hombre wanted his initial on th' stock. His name's Hastings."

"What? The word almost exploded from Quirt's lips.

Tegland looked up in surprise. "I said his name is Hastings. Dan Hastings, if I remember correct. What's th' matter? Do ye know him?"

"Is he a big bulky galoot with a scowl on his face most of th' time, dark-complected like an Injun?"

Tegland nodded. "Yeah, an' now that yuh mention it, I don't believe I ever saw Hastings smile."

"I reckon it's th' same man," Quirt answered. "Yeah, I know him. Had a little trouble with'm about two years back. It'd be just shortly before he came down here." Then Quirt went ahead and told the story. "Hastings is probably th' one that knows th' most about them cows of yours," he finished. " 'Course when he was up North they never got anythin' of the kind on'm, but he was under suspicion most of th' time."

TEGLAND looked puzzled when Quirt had completed the story. "Well, I don't know," he remarked slowly, brow furrowed in thought. 'After what yuh tell me about this Hastings, I don't know what to think. Th' Bar-H seems to be runin' a square game, though. T'tell th' truth, I did suspicion once that mebbe they was changin' my brands, so I appealed to the Cattlemen's Association an' they sent a range-detective down to look things over. He couldn't find no evidence of crooked work, an' while th' Bar-H had plenty of cows, Stillman had bills of sale to prove he bought 'em

fair and open. Jest th' same, my cows keep disappearin', so it must be somebody else what's to blame. 'Nother thing: Stillman has already proved his friendship for me by loanin' me money on th' Lazy-T—"

"Why didn't yuh get th' money from th' bank in Kirktown?" Quirt asked, as he sifted some tobacco into a paper.

Tegland coughed and then answered, "Th' Kirktown Savin's Bank wouldn't let me have as much as I needed. They's allowed as how th' Lazy-T was a bad risk. Stillman heard about th' refusal an' rode over here to offer me th' money. Right neighborly, I calls it. He must be pretty rich, th' way he buys cows an' all."

Quirt lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. Then, "Well, mebbe yuh're right, Mr. Tegland. It may be that Hastings has turned over a new leaf. It's hard to believe, though, if it's th' same Hastings I was speakin' of."

"Anyhow, that's th' way matters stand," Tegland went on. "Th' Lazy-T is mortgaged up to th' hilt, an' unless my stock stops disappearin,' I don't know how I'll pay off th' money when it falls due. That'll be along next fall, after beef-round-up. I've asked the Cattlemen's Association to send down another man, but so far they ain't seen fit to do anything."

"Suppose yuh let me look around on my own hook," Quirt suggested, "until th' Association gets their man down here. We won't think about any wages right now."

Tegland nodded agreement. "My idea's this," he explained, "I'll give ye a job where ye'll be pretty much your own boss. Go down to th' bunkhouse an' tell my foreman, Brad Grimshaw, that I've took yuh on as range rider an' stray-man. Then keep your eyes peeled an' see what yuh can pick up. I'll be th' only one to give orders, so Grimshaw won't have nothin' to say. I can't offer much money now, but if things turns out right, we'll fix that up later. That suit ye?"

"Anything suits me that suits you, Mr. Tegland," Quirt responded. A feeling of pity rose in his heart as he thought of the gallant fight Tegland was making in the face of great odds. I'll sure be glad to do anything—"

At this point a girl entering the room interrupted the sentence. When she saw Tegland was occupied, she turned to go, but he called her back.

"Maurine," he introduced, "this is Quirt Carlyle, th' son of an old friend of mine. Quirt's going to sign on with th' Lazy-T for a spell, an' I feel like he's goin' to help us a heap. It'll be almost like havin' Zach Carlyle at my back again. Quirt, this is my daughter. I reckon that—" Another fit of coughing cut short the sentence.

Maurine Tegland thrust forth her hand and Quirt took it in his own, noting her firm grasp. "I'm glad to know you, Quirt Carlyle," she was saying, her cool gaze swiftly appraising him.

She was of medium height with dark brown hair and the flush of youth on her smooth cheeks. Never at ease with women, Quirt felt quite at home in her presence. There was something about her that lifted him, a certain strength that seemed to flow from her firm fingers into his own hand. She was alive, vibrant with vitality. Her full red lips were strengthened by a firm chin that be-

spoke plainly the resolute capable woman it adorned. Quirt saw all this, but in not quite the same terms. "Plumb ornamental an' a square-shooter," was the manner in which he mentally took stock of the girl.

He smiled easily into the gray eyes that scrutinized him so calmly. "I reckon, ma'am, that mebbe your daddy kinda overestimates my abilities. I aim to do what I can, though."

"That's all any man can do," the answer came back to him, white teeth glistening between parted lips. "Dad doesn't often make mistakes in men, though, so I think I'll take you at his estimate."

THEY talked a few minutes; then Maurine departed and Quirt took up his sombrero to leave. He was at the door when another thought came to him. "Say, about this Stephen Vance—who is he?"

"I can't tell ye much about him," Tegland responded. "He came to the Lazy-T about three weeks ago. Said he was lookin' for ranch-land, but he ain't bought nothin' yet. He offered me board while he's stayin' here, but of course I couldn't take any money from'm. I don't know much about him. He takes his horse and goes for long rides some place. Anyway, he stays away, sometimes two or three days at a stretch. Never says where he's been when he gets back. Acts pretty decent with us, an' helps me a mite sometimes. Jest another of them harmless English Johnnies, I reckon."

"Mebbe he is, an' then again mebbe he ain't," Quirt drawled. "I took note of th' fact that he forks his bronc like a cowwillie, an' they ain't a puncher in th' country that can twist a smoke any faster'n what little Stevie does. On th' surface he looks all right. He's got lotsa nerve an' knows how to handle his fists. Just th' same, I'm figgerin' on keepin' an eye open to see if he tips his hand."

Tegland nodded agreement and Quirt took his departure. Out in front of the ranch house he caught up his horse and rode down to the corral. Here he unsaddled and turned the horse through the gate. Then, carrying his rig, he headed for the bunkhouse.

The bunkhouse held a single occupant when he arrived. At the far end, at a crudely constructed wooden desk, sat a grimy, whisker-faced man of about forty, poring over papers. At Quirt's approach he looked up and then, seeing a stranger, raised inquiringly his bushy eye-brows.

"If yuh're lookin' for a job, cowboy," he began in gruff, unpleasant tones, "yuh come to th' wrong outfit. We ain't takin' nobody on."

Quirt laughed genially. "Me, I ain't lookin' for no job. I got one. You Brad Grimshaw?"

A curt nod of the head answered him. "What can I do for yuh?"

"I just left Mr. Tegland, an' he says for yuh to put me on th' payroll."

Grimshaw glared at Quirt for a moment, then. "Since when is Tegland doin' th' hirin'? he oughta know we ain't got no use for any more punchers. I don't know where I can work yuh."

"I reckon Tegland's got th' right to hire an' fire at wil, without no permit from his foreman, bein' as he owns th' outfit," Quirt drawled. "Mebbe he figgered yuh wouldn't mind if he took some of th' burden of work off'n your shoulders."

The sarcasm was lost upon Grimshaw, who replied with a shrug, "All right. If he wants to take on more expense it ain't none of my affair." He drew an account book toward him.

"Jack Quirt." Quirt and Tegland had already agreed that he was to use the name "Jack Quirt" instead of "Quirt Carlyle," until such time as he could learn if Hastings of the Bar-H was the same Hastings with whom Quirt had had the run-in up North. On this score there was little doubt in Quirt's mind. Tegland's description of the man fitted Black Dan Hastings to a T. As the Bar-H was quite some distance from the Lazy-T there was little probability of Hastings' learning of Quirt's being in the neighborhood as long as Quirt kept out of his way.

Quirt smiled to himself as, looking over Grimshaw's shoulder, he noted the foreman entering in the book the name "Jack Kwirt." He said nothing, and when Grimshaw had closed the book and asked what outfits he'd worked for Quirt replied, "I been gentlin' down some broncs for a horse-dealer up in Idaho for the last year or so."

Grimshaw moved his lips in what was intended for a malicious smile. "Well, yuh won't get nothin' like that here. Tegland don't allus show good sense, so I aims to keep yuh under my eye until such time as I can see what yuh amount to. Right now th' barns an' stables needs white-washin' right bad. That'll be your first job——"

QUIRT laughed softly. "Yuh got another guess comin' on that, old-timer," he cut in. "I already got my orders *direct* from Mr. Tegland, an' he tells me I don't take orders from nobody but him. I'm th' new outrider an' stray-man for th' Lazy-T."

The effect of the words on Grimshaw was electrifying. For a second his mouth hung open and his face grew pale through the whiskers. Then he came to, with a snap. "Hell!" he snarled, "that's how th' land lies, eh? Stray-man, eh? Stray-liar! That's what."

Quirt clenched his fist and was about to hurl it forward into Grimshaw's tobacco-stained teeth. Then he thought better of it. 'Shucks, mister," he laughed, "that ain't no way to take on. Here I gets me a job, an' right away yuh accuse me of trifin' with th' truth. How come?"

"Yuh ain't foolin' me none," Grimshaw growled. "Yuh're one of these here range detectives what Old Tegland asked th' Cattlemen's Association to send down, that's what."

"Ho-ho! that's good," Quirt jeered. "Me a range-dick." He straightened his face and then continued in a more serious tone, "That's a good one on you, Grimshaw. Y'see, my dad an' Tegland was pards back in th' old days. I reckon that's th' only reason he took me on. He knew they wa'n't much to be done around here, but not likin' to refuse his old pal's son, he just hired me an' give me a soft job. Even if I was a range-dick what difference would it make? They ain't nothing yuh're afraid of, is they?"

"Not me," Grimshaw declared emphatically. "I ain't done nothin'. Tegland's allus gettin' th' idea his cows is bein' run off. 'Course, rustlers gets one now an' then, as is only

natural, but to hear th' Old Man talk yuh'd think he was losin' 'em by th' hundreds. He never had near so many cows like he says. Bein' foreman, I reckon I oughta know, an' they ain't no need of range-dicks comin' messin' around here."

"Just between you an' me," Quirt lowered his voice impressively, "I ain't got no use for range-dicks myself. They make things plumb uncomfortable sometimes for them as is tryin' to make a decent livin'."

Grimshaw's face lit up and he looked interested. "Yuh ever have any run-ins with'm?" he asked eagerly.

Quirt laughed insolently. "That's neither here nor there, mister. I ain't tellin' all I know, not until you'n me is better acquainted. All I asks is that yuh give me a free hand here until I learn th' country." He stopped for a moment, and then winking broadly at Grimshaw, went on, "After that, Grimshaw, mebbe it'll be better all around if we get to know each other real well. What say?"

"I get your slant, cowboy," Grimshaw assented, almost cordially, "an' yuh can do your own dealin' for awhile. Later, if yuh like th' looks of my game," he added significantly, "mebbe yuh'll feel like takin' a hand."

"Mebbe," Quirt answered agreeably, and turned to leave.

Grimshaw followed him to the door and, noticing Quirt's angora chaps, which lay across his saddle just outside the threshold, remarked, "I'd a-known you was from up No'th if I'd a-seen them 'pussy-cats' an' that three-quarter rig when yuh came in." He was growing more friendly every minute. "I reckon yuh got an apology comin' for th' way I accused yuh of bein' an Association dick."

Quirt laughed easily at the remark. "If things turn out right, Grimshaw," he replied, "yuh'll learn before many months that I grade up a heap different from them babies. Yep, I reckon I'll have to discard them angora chaps an' get me a pair of leather 'uns if I stay down here. Kinda hot for wool. Yuh don't happen to know where I can pick up a good hide or so, do yuh?" He looked blandly into Grimshaw's eyes as the last question was asked.

The foreman rose to the bait like a hungry fish. "Lemme know when yuh want said hides," he answered meaningly, "an' I'll see that yuh get all yuh can use." Then with a wink, "Just enough to *make* a pair of *chaps,* of course."

He thrust out a hand to Quirt, but that canny individual happened to be rolling a cigarette and didn't notice the gesture. Then without again looking at the foreman, he stooped, picked up his rig, and called, "So-long" over his shoulder, and sauntered off, leaving Grimshaw with the impression that he knew more than he talked about. In short, that he was a potential rustler, if the opportunity offered. And that was just the sort of impression that Quirt had intended Grimshaw should get.

As he walked away he noticed from the corner of his eye that Stephen Vance was eyeing him narrowly from around the side of the bunkhouse. The Englishman had evidentally heard their conversation from the time that Quirt and Grimshaw stepped to the bunkhouse door.

"If that Johnnie Bull is mixed up in this cow-stealin' game," Quirt

commented to himself, giving no indication that he saw Vance, "I reckon I've give *him* somethin' to think about, too."

CHAPTER IV

THE weeks passed rapidly and grew into months. By the time calf round-up came around Quirt knew the country pretty thoroughly. He had made the acquaintance of the ranchers for miles around during the months that had passed, dropping in on them casually, ostensibly in the course of duty, but in reality to "size-up" all and any who might be engaged in the highly profitable but dangerous game of cattle rustling.

Even though he hadn't thus far been able to uncover anything tangible, Quirt hadn't been a total loss to the Lazy-T. He uncovered waterholes hitherto unknown, and learned where lay the best feeding grounds. His string of ponies was kept almost in a continual lather, for Quirt kept on the outlook from early morn until late at night.

His unceasing vigilance had saved stock for the Lazy-T more times than Quirt could remember. He'd come up out of a valley and topping the table-lands would see, far in the distance, a group of men driving before them a small bunch of cattle. The instant Quirt was sighted they'd leave the stock and make a getaway. Quirt had never been able to get near enough to recognize any of the men, but from their actions told plainly what had been their intentions. Usually they had too great a start to make it worth while following them, and Quirt preferred to keep his identity unknown as long as possible.

He had visited the Bar-H range on such occasions as he learned Hastings and Stillman were in town, and looked over their cattle, but could find no evidences of brand-blotting. Now, though, it was nearly time to come to an understanding with Hastings.

Instead of living at the ranch house, Quirt had taken up his abode in an abandoned line-camp some distance from the Lazy-T ranch house, and only rode in now and then to report progress and confer with Tegland. It may be remarked that he held a good many conferences with Maurine Tegland as well, but these conferences had little to do with cattle rustlers. Vance, too, spent many hours with Maurine, so Quirt knew she wasn't playing any favorites.

The girl was responsible to a large extent for Quirt's avoidance of Dan Hastings. Should the two meet it wasn't absolutely certain what might happen, and she had very decided ideas about the sort of gunplay that results in bloodshed. As Quirt had come more and more to admire Maurine and her opinions, his ideas regarding Black Dan had undergone a decided change. For the first time in his life Quirt had met a woman who occupied the greater part of his thinking hours.

Shortly after he had taken his pack to the line-camp, Stephen Vance joined him there, with the excuse that he'd be less of a burden on the ranch house. Quirt had an idea that Vance had followed him out merely to keep an eye on him, but the Englishman was invited in with all the cordiality at Quirt's command. Despite his suspicions and Vance's odd English ways Quirt

found himself liking the tall man more and more every day, and the two got on very well together, although Quirt, being out on the range the greater part of the time, saw little of Vance.

Brad Grimshaw had thrown out hints from time to time, but Quirt always stalled him off. He felt that Grimshaw was only a pawn in the game the rustlers were playing, and he wanted to "get" the man at the top. Quirt know that it required more than just his willingness to throw in with Grimshaw to induce the foreman to tell all he knew. However, he kept Grimshaw nibling, at the bait all the time.

"In fact, Brad," Quirt had said to the man one day, "you just keep your mouth shut, until I can get my plans laid, then yuh'll see somethin' big pulled off." He put out a tentative feeler. "Yuh know, it never did get nobody anythin' rustlin' for another man. I'm aimin' to direct operations when I work. What d'yuh think?"

"Yuh sure got th' right idea," Grimshaw had agreed enthusiastically, "just let me know when yuh're ready.——"

"An' whatever yuh do," Quirt had cautioned, "don't say anything to anybody about me—*not to anybody,* see? Them range-dicks might get to lookin' down along th' border here for me, an' I wouldn't want 'em to bust up our plans."

"I won't say a word to a soul," Grimshaw had promised earnestly, and Quirt rode away, laughing to himself at the man's stupidity.

QUIRT had ridden a foam-flecked, panting horse into the small corral back of the line-camp one day and was just changing saddles when, looking back along the trail that led from Kirktown, he saw Vance riding, leading a pack-mule. He tightened his cinch then, leading the horse around to the front of the cabin, waited for Vance to arrive.

"Been into town, eh?" Quirt greeted, as Vance swung his long form to the ground.

"Quite right, old top," the Englishman answered. "We were jolly well out of food and other such. I wanted a ride anyway."

Quirt helped him unpack and carry the sacks of provisions into the cabin, then started to leave. Vance called him back.

"Beastly warm, what?" he remarked, smiling friendly at Quirt and fitting the ever-present monocle to his right eye. Quirt nodded, impatient to be off, then Vance continued, "What say to a bit of peg, eh, old chap? I have something here——"

Quirt refused with a shake of his head. "Too warm for likker, Vance. Now, if yuh had some of that cold champainy water I might take yuh yup——"

"Ah, but I have something here that'll wash the alkali out quicker than that. One minute." Vance went to the table upon which lay a huge roll of burlap that he had carried on the saddle before him, all the way from Kirktown. This he commenced to unroll. Fold after fold of the burlap fell to the floor, until at last a small piece of ice as large as a man's two fists was revealed to view.

Quirt watched him with amazement as the ice was uncovered. "Do yuh mean to tel me yuh packed that all th' way from town?" he demanded.

Vance eyed the bit of ice ruefully

and his lips twisted in a wry smile as he answered, "To be sure. Creature comforts, and all that sort of thing, y'know. It was much larger when I left but, nevertheless, it will do."

He moved across to the stove and procured the coffee pot which, for a wonder, was clean. Into this the piece of ice was deposited. Then delving into another sack he brought to view eggs, two grape fruit, and last but not least, a tall, square bottle, the label of which bore the words, "Gordon & Co.'s Dry Gin."

"Had to order these—clear from 'Frisco—except the eggs," Vance remarked almost apologetically in his jerky sentences, as he removed the glass stopper from the bottle. "Now, if you'll just let me have the sack of sugar. 'Obliged."

Into the coffee pot went a quantity of the gin. Followed the juice of two grapefruit and some sugar, then Vance skillfully broke the eggs, putting in only the whites. Quirt looked on in amazement as the man worked.

"Wha—what's th' idea?" he managed to stammer at last.

"Well, don't y' know," Vance explained, plugging up the spout and wrapping a piece of burlap around the coffee pot, "one gets jolly well fed-up on straight liquor. One must have a cocktail on occasion, y'see." He began to shake vigorously the coffee pot cocktail-shaker, while Quirt shook with laughter.

"Of all the crazy hombres I ever see," Quirt laughed, "you Britishers take top-money. I hope yuh ain't aimin' to poison me, nor nothin'."

Vance laughed but said nothing until he had unwrapped the burlap from the improvised cocktail-shaker and poured two cups full of the foamy-topped drink. One he handed courteously to Quirt. "Try that, before you give your bally opinions."

QUIRT sipped cautiously at first, then took more. "Oh, mama," he sighed enthusiastically with a peaceful sigh, "just like velvet. What d'yuh call it, Stevie?"

"In my club in dear ol' Lunnon," Vance returned gravely, "it goes by another name, but in honor of the bovines—that is to say, the cow-country—I believe we should re-name it. What say to Unbranded Maverick, eh, what?"

"Unbranded Maverick it is," Quirt agreed warmly, as Vance remarked, "I say, do you know a chap of the name of Hastings?"

Quirt felt his heart almost skip a beat, but he answered calmly, "Hastings? Hastings. Lemme see. I mighta crossed trails with'm at some time or other. Why?"

"Met him in Kirktown. Part owner of the Bar-H. Inquisitive chap. Wanted to know where I was putting up. Told him. Told him about living with you. Wanted to know how you spelt your name. I spelt it out for him. Q-u-i-r-t. Like that. Don't spell it with a K by any chance, do you? Hastings seemed put out, y'know. That is to say, perturbed — excited — pale as a ghost — all that sort of bally fuss. Took hold — my arm. Wanted more information. Really had difficult time shaking the beggar. Silly ass! Thought you might care to know."

"Thanks," Quirt uttered the word. Mentally he decided it was time for a showdown with Dan Has-

tings. Somehow he felt that Vance's words were given in the sense of a warning, but he couldn't quite see why. It might be that Vance was working with the Rocking-Chair crew and not at all interested in the Bar-H. Quirt cast a quick glance at the Englishman for a further hint, but Vance was engaged in polishing his eye-glass in a manner that almost assured Quirt that cattle-rustling was the farthest thing from the man's mind. "I might 'a' met him some place," Quirt added at last.

Vance drained his cup and looked up. "Big chap. Black complexion. Not dark. *Black.* Frown. Looked at his gun and left in a hurry."

"Well, if he's goin 'on th' prod for me, I'll meet'm sooner or later," Quirt answered carelessly. Then mimicking Vance's tones, "I say, old chawppie, 'ave you any more of that bloomin' Unbranded Maverick left in your bally coffee-pot. It's top-hole, y'know.

Vance's face broke into a broad grin as he answered, "You silly acc. It's not an Unbranded Maverick *you* want. It's a whole bally herd, what?"

He emptied the pot into their cups and a few minutes later Quirt rose and donned his sombrero. "That's a right smart drink, Stevie," he said sauntering to the door, "do it again sometime. Well, see yuh later."

"Cheerio, old top," Vance called after him. Then in a graver tone, "I say, Quirt."

"Yeah?" Quirt turned at the door.

"That Hastings chap. Didn't look so good, y'know. Be careful."

"Thanks, I got yuh, Stevie." Quirt moved through the door and to his horse. Again in Vance's words he seemed to sense a warning. Well, there was no time like the present for a meeting with Dan Hastings, now that his identity was known, at least suspected.

He got into his saddle and swinging the horse around headed in the direction of the Bar-H. As they came down from the hills and loped across the sagebrush - covered prairie, the heat grew more intense, and Quirt let his horse choose its own gait. Overhead little bunches of clouds floated lazily against the blue heavens.

Suddenly, he noticed some distance away, a dark object moving awkwardly along the ground. Above it two huge buzzards stirred the air with sluggish wings, soaring in great circles that drew nearer and ever nearer to the earth.

"Wonder what them dam' birds is after," Quirt muttered to himself, swinging the horse around. In a short time he learned what it was. A calf lay on the ground, bawling pietously, one of its hind legs broken. As he approached Quirt could see the animal struggle to its feet, stagger along three-footed for a way and then fall again. The mother-cow was nowhere in sight. Quirt dismounted at its side and noting its swollen tongue, saw that it had been without water for some hours. Then drawing his .45 he sent a bullet through the calf's brain.

"It's hard luck, doggie, but I reckon I'll have to leave yuh to th' birds," he muttered, turning over the body to see what brand it carried. As he did so an involuntary exclamation left his lips. It was a Lazy-T calf, that had recently undergone a job of brand-blotting. *The Lazy-T had been changed into*

the Rocking-Chair brand!

Whoever had done the job had done it hastily and made a bad job of it. Where the running-iron had passed over the old Lazy-T scar to give the brand an appearance of authenticity, it had run off to one side, leaving a portion of the original brand untouched.

QUIRT reasoned that the rustler had broken the calf's leg when roping it, and had not noticed until after the animal was branded that it couldn't walk. Then he had left it to the mercy of anyone or anything that might find it.

"Well, that's some evidence against the Rocking-Chair to begin with," Quirt cogitated, a cold rage in his heart. He drew out his huge clasp knife and after some minutes' work succeeded in skinning off the portion of hide bearing the bogus brand. "I reckon I'll ride over an' talk turkey to that outfit tomorrow."

Rolling up the piece of hide he again mounted and once more resumed his journey.

It was late afternoon when the Bar-H ranch buildings hove into view, and the sun was already descending behind the tops of the lower peaks.

Quirt dismounted in front of the ranch house, which was a rudely constructed affair of unplaned logs and mud-filled chinks. Leaving his horse he knocked at the door. No one answered, so after waiting a few minutes he sauntered around to the back of the house and down to the bunkhouse a short distance away. The building was empty, but hearing voices he walked around to the back of the bunkhouse where he saw Lee Stillman and Dan Hastings leaning against the corral fence. Sure enough, the Hastings was the Hastings of old, Quirt's ancient enemy, Quirt noticed as he approached the pair.

Hastings was engaged in rolling a cigarette and Stillman was talking earnestly to him in tones too low to carry. Consequently, Quirt approached to within a few feet of the two men before they were aware of his presence. As his shadow fell along the ground Stillman looked up.

"Hello, cowboy. What can we do for you?"

Quirt nodded to Stillman, whom he had never met, although the man had been pointed out to him in town, without removing his eyes from Hastings, who jumped as though shot at sight of Quirt.

As Hastings whirled around, his free hand darted into his vest, but remained there at Quirt's words.

"Nev' mind pulin' that underarm gun, Hastings," Quirt drawled coolly as he dropped his hand, hooking thumb into belt near his holster. "I allus was a heap faster'n you on the' draw, an' I could a-plugged yuh five minutes ago if I'd wanted to. Lord knows yuh got it comin', but for th' present I'm just aimin' to talk a mite."

Hastings grew pale and a sickly smile appeared on his face. Muttering something under his breath, he withdrew slowly his hand, holding prominently between thumb and forefinger a match which he scratched and touched to his cigarette.

"That's better, Hastings," Quirt smiled; then to Stillman, "Yuh see, Stillman, me'n your partner had some trouble back a few years. mebbe he's already told yuh about it, but it wouldn't surprise me none

if he hadn't. It wa'n't nothin' to be proud of."

"Hell! Carlyle, that was an accident," Hastings cut in.

"Yeah," Quirt shot back, "th' kind of accident that's all arranged for by th' party that comes out topside."

"Aw, Dan's all right," Stillman defended his partner. "I reckon what trouble you boys had don't mean nothin' nowdays. Come on, why not let bygones be bygones?" he finished in a whining voice. He was a stoop-shouldered, undersized man, with shifty eyes set far back in a narrow head.

"It's not that I come to talk about, Stilman," Quirt endeavored to throw a scare into Hastings. "I come down here lookin' for this measly coyote, an' I ain't foolin' none when I tells yuh that my ol' six-gun was all oiled up an' working plumb easy in th' holster. Howsomever, I'm forgettin' that, until I've got more provocation. I could 'a' shot Dan heaps of times if I'd wanted to go to th' trouble of lookin' him up, and' wastin' th' lead. I don't go stirrin up trouble, though."

FEELING once more assured of his physical safety Hastings again grew confident. "That goes for me, too," he growled. "As I said before, that other trouble was an accident, but that ain't meanin' I like yuh any better than I ever did, Quirt. Th' less I see of yuh, th' better I like it——"

"Then watch th' kind of game yuh deal your cards from, Hastings," Quirt shot back. "Th' whole pot just simmers down to this: They's a heap of cows disappearin' off'n the Lazy-T. Knowin' th' rep yuh packed up North, it kinda struck me that yuh knew somethin' about it; so I thought I'd warn yuh before yuh got a hole punctured in your yellow hide. If yuh ain't had nothin' to do with th' rustlin', all right. Mebbe yuh're goin' straight. If yuh are, yuh ain't got nothin' to worry about; *but* if yuh ain't—— Well, look out, that's all. I'll be watchin' for yuh next time we cross guns."

Quirt swung around to the other man. "You, Stilman, I don't know nothin' about you—yet. I'm tellin' yuh now, though, that yuh're in right bad company, an' if trouble breaks, yuh're liable to be stretchin' a throw-rope with this here other hombre. That's a warnin' or an invitation for trouble. Take it or leave it, just as yuh like."

"Look here," Stillman answered, voice trembling with rage, "don't be coming over here and trying to tell me what I should do. I guess I know my business——"

"See that yuh take proper care of it," Quirt cut in, and there was an odd twisted smile on his lips, "an' yuh mebbe wil be able to run it for some time to come. Fall round-up's not so many weeks away, an' I *know* just how much stock th' Lazy-T ought to have. Hell's goin' to be a-poppin' if my figgers don't check up accordin'."

Stillman calmed down immediately. "You got us all wrong, cowboy. Why should I steal Tegland's cattle? I got th' money to buy what I want. Fact is, I got bills of sale for every cow owned by this outfit. Another thing: I've already proved my friendship for Tegland. Do you know who it was loaned him money on the Lazy-T when the bank turned him cold down? Huh? It was me."

"Yeah, I know that, too," Quirt responded, "but it don't mean nothin'. I'm bettin' a mess of hop-toads yuh'd foreclose in a minute, if th' money ain't ready when it falls due."

Quirt hesitated a moment and, taking out the "makin's," rolled a cigarette. The instant his hands were occupied as he ran his tongue along the paper, Hastings' right hand dropped to the holster that hung at his hip. But Quirt outguessed him. Raising his eyes he looked narrowly at Hastings while a whimsical smile curved his lips. "No, I wouldn't do it was I you, Dan," he drawled softly. "Even now I could beat yuh to th' draw, but it ain't goin' to be necessary, 'cause yuh wouldn't take a chance less'n I didn't have a gun, or my back was turned."

Hastings' hand came away from the holster as though he'd been burnt and he licked nervously his dry lips. Deep in Quirt's smiling eyes flickered menacingly a pale blue flame that warned the man not to try conclusions at that moment.

"An' now I'll be driftin' on, I reckon," Quirt announced carelessly as he lit the cigarette. "They's plenty more knows I was comin' here an' what for," he bluffed, "so don't try no six-gun practice when my back's turned."

Then with an "Adios" mockingly flung back over his shoulder he turned and sauntered to his waiting horse, leaving the two men watching and cursing him under their breaths.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS late afternoon of the following day before Quirt reached the Rocking-Chair ranch. Ed Wilson, owner of the ranch was sitting on the small porch that fronted the ranch house, when Quirt dismounted. Quirt reached into his saddle-bag and took out the piece of hide upon which the Rocking-Chair had been burnt over the Lazy-T mark, and strode up on the porch.

"H'are yuh, Quirt," the grizzled old ranchman greeted genially, as he spat a long stream of tobacco juice over the rail, and with an unbooted foot shoved a chair in Quirt's direction. "Light a spell. I jest been sittin' here tryin' to raise my nerve to put on them new boots I got in town coupla days back. Had 'em on all mornin', but they pinch like all get-out, so I'm jest airin' my toes a mite. How's tricks?"

"Pretty fair, Mr. Wilson," Quirt answered pleasantly enough. Then he came directly to the subject uppermost in his mind. "How's your herd comin'? Increasin' fast enough to suit yuh?"

"Fair t'middlin', fair t'middlin'," Wilson answered nonchantly. "Not like I could wish for, of course, but considerin I only lost a few to rustlers this season I ain't done so bad. 'Bout like most seasons, I reckon."

"Yuh ought to try an' pick up a few strays here an' there," Quirt observed quietly. "That's one way of buildin' up your herd. Or what's quicker, run off a bunch of somebody's stock."

Wilson eyed Quirt narrowly for a moment, mouthed his cud, then spat a long brown stream unerringly at a bit of sage growing nearby before he spoke. Then, "Meanin' just what?" he demanded sharply.

"Just this: If yuh insist on runnin' th' Rocking-Chair brand over th' Lazy-T, yuh better get somebody

to do your work that can make a better job of it!" As he drawled the words Quirt quickly unrolled the piece of hide and threw it on Wilson's lap.

Wilson's face flamed as he leaped from his chair without looking at the hide. "Get outta here," he roared savagely. "Th' nerve of yuh hintin' that I'm rustlin' Tegland's cows!" He darted toward the door to get his gun. "If yuh ain't gone by th' time I come out," he choked, features convulsed with rage, "I'll fill yuh so full of lead that a derrick couldn't lift yuh——"

"Cool down, Wilson, cool down," Quirt ordered, as he moved over and interposed his body between the ranch owner and the door. "If they's any gun-play to be made, yuh're liable to be on th' receivin' end of th' lead with th' evidence we got."

For a moment Wilson listened as the full force of Quirt's words penetrated to his understanding. "What evidence yuh talkin' about," he snapped.

"That piece of calf hide that fell off'n your lap when yuh jumped up," Quirt explained calmly. "Before yuh go on th' prod again, yuh better take stock of how things stand. Here!" He stooped over, and retrieving the piece of hide which lay on the floor, handed it to Wilson. "Mebbe yuh can explain that," Quirt said sarcastically. "by sayin' they's a mistake been made. That's th' usual excuse. I reckon it won't go this time, though."

Wilson took the hide, then as he looked at it his eyes bulged. "What —what's this—m-mean?" he stammered incoherently. "Where — where'd yuh get this?"

Quirt laughed at the man's confusion. "Took it off'n a calf not a hell of a long way from here," he explained. "One of your men musta broke th' critter's leg when he roped it. Anyway, it was branded an' then left to th' buzzards. I had to kill it. I guessed yuh'd be interested so I brought this piece of hide for yuh to see."

"Whoa-back! They's somethin' wrong here——"

"Yeah," Quirt put in dryly, "that's what they allus say. I knowns it's wrong, too. That's what I come to see yuh about."

"But—but, Quirt," Wilson said earnestly, "this is all news to me. I swear I don't know nothin' about it."

"Yuh better check up on your outfit, then," Quirt answered shortly, "because it's plain as day somebody whimsical, "It ain't such a neat job, did that blottin'. His voice grew neither. I tell yuh, Wilson, I'd be plumb ashamed to have anybody workin' for me that can't run an iron no better'n that."

"Quirt, I really don't know nothin' about this," Wilson protested earnestly. "I know it looks right bad for me, but I'm talkin' God's truth." He wiped the sweat from his brow, then asked, "Does anybody else know about this?"

Quirt shook his head. "I ain't told anybody else—yet."

"I'll be plumb obliged if yuh don't. This can be all fixed up some way. If Tegland ever gets wind of this he'll make it hot for me, him holdin' a grudge like he does." He sank down in the chair overcome.

Something in the man's manner carried the conviction of truth. "Well, don't let it worry yuh none, Mr. Wilson," Quirt said more gen-

tly. "I'm beginnin' to believe yuh didn't have anything to do with it. 'Nother thing: Tegland ain't holdin' a grudge, but he thinks you are. Yuh gotta admit, though, that it looks bad, this Rocking-Chair brand."

WILSON nodded, his voice almost quavery with emotion. "Yeah, I know it. Yuh can ask anybody that's knowed me for years, though, an' they'll tell yuh I allus packed an honest brand. That's why I got so rarin' mad when yuh accused me. It was th' indignity of th' thing like that got me peeved."

Quirt nodded sympathetically. "Mr. Tegland hisself said he didn't think yuh'd condescend to rustlin', on day when I was talkin' to 'm."

The words seemed to brace Wilson . "Did he? I just plain gotta go over an' make things up with that ol' cuss," he said. "We been actin' likea coupla of kids over a little trouble that didn't amount to nothin'."

"I reckon yuh're right, Mr. Wilson. Howsomever, that's another matter. What we've got to find out now is which of your men's been doin' this brandin' an' why."

Wilson came back to the subject with a start. "By dad!" he said, "that's right. Stay to supper, Quirt. Th' boys'll be driftin' in pretty soon, an' we'll look 'em over careful. Mebbe I got a snake in th' outfit, but I wouldn't never've believed it."

After the meal in the cook-house, the old cattleman put the proposition plainly up to the men, telling them of Quirt's find. At the end of an hour's conversation and questioning Quirt knew no more than he had known before. To the best of his belief there wasn't a puncher on the Rocking-Chair who could be accused of the brand-blotting. One and all they appeared honest, and Wilson assured him that most of the men had been with him for some years and were entirely reliable.

"—nevertheless, boys," Wilson finished, just before the men filed out, "it's a black mark against the Rocking-Chair an' I'm relyin' on you to keep your eyes open and clear this thing up. All ye been doin' is lookin' out for our own stock. From now on if yuh see anything queer about anyone else's cows, let me know. They's some pretty smooth rustlin' goin' on, an' if things keeps up th' way they've started, th' Lazy-T won't be th' only outfit losin' stock." He hesitated a moment to let the words sink in, then, "That's all. I'm dependin' on ye."

When the men had left the room, Quirt and Wilson returned to the ranch house.

"Until these things is cleared up, Mr. Wilson," Quirt said as he prepared to leave, "I think it best if we don't say anything about that calf I found. Whoever else might be crooked I'm pretty sure it ain't you—"

He was about to say more, when looking up, he saw through the window an evil pair of eyes gleaming maliciously above a six-shooter!

The next instant Quirt's gun was out and a jet of fire darted from its muzzle, as two reports almost blended above the crash of shattered glass. At the same instant Quirt felt a breeze fan his cheek as a bullet sped by and buried itself in the woodwork behind. Wilson, moving and thinking uncommonly fast, darted to the table and blew out the lamp.

The next instant the soft thudding of rapid footsteps, then the creak of saddle leather and the staccato pounding of horse's hoofs were heard.

With one accord the two men rushed for the doorway. A precious moment was lost as they bumped together, each trying to be first to gain the open air. By the time they stumbled off the porch a dusky form on horseback could be seen moving rapidly away, about a hundred yards from the ranch house.

From Quirt's long six-shooter streamed orange fire and the rapid reports of flaming lead. By now darkness had fallen and the moon not yet being up, it was too dark for accurate shooting.

"Get your horse," Wilson yelled excitedly. "I'll be with ye in a minnit an' we'll take after that dirty coyote."

"Too late. He's got too big a start," Quirt returned, reloading his gun. "He didn't hit me, anyway. That leaves us even, 'cause I reckon I missed him with all my shots, too."

AT that moment a rush of footsteps announced the arrival of the Rocking-Chair punchers as they came tearing up from the bunkhouse to learn what had caused the shooting.

Wilson quickly explained and then gave orders. 'Slim," he spoke to one of his hands, "you'n Jerry fork yours horses an' see can yuh pick up that snake's trail."

"I'll run along with'm," Quirt announced. "No, come back to the house with me. They's something I forgot to ask yuh about."

A few minutes later Quirt and Wilson were back in the ranch house. A quick survey of the wall disclosed the bullet imbedded in the heavy plank partition. Taking his knife, Quirt dug the lead out and looked it over, then handed it to Wilson.

"Kinda outta shape where it hit a nail," Wilson remarked, "but it looked like it might be .38 calibre. Find th' man what carries a .38 gun an' *maybe* we got something to go on."

"Yeah," Quirt laughed, "*maybe* is good. They's just about as many .38's carried as there is .45's. Nope, we got to have more evidence than that. Well, they ain't much harm done, 'ceptin' a broken window. What was it yuh wanted to ask me?"

"Who's this Englishman, Vance?" Wilson put the question. "What d'ye know about him?"

"Darn little." Quirt explained what little he knew of Vance and then asked, "Why, got anything on him?"

Wilson shook his head. "No, but he seems to be hangin' around here more or less. Drops in to see me quite often. Plumb chummy with th' boys down to th' bunkhouse, too. They all seem to like him, though, even if he is a queer-actin' cuss. Accordin' to t'h boys he plays a wicked game of 'draw,' when he drops down occasional an' deals a few with'm."

"Is *that* so?" Quirt answered slowly. "Well, t'tell th' truth, I don't know what to think about that hombre. I can't help likin' him, though. Yet, sometimes, I wonder if he don't know more about this cow-country than he lets on, even if he does act stupid-like at times—"

"Don't suppose it was him took that pot-shot at ye?" Wilson cut in, struck by a sudden thought.

"Nope, I don't think it was th' Britisher," Quirt answered. "I saw

enough of th' galoot's face to tell he war dark-complected, but his gun was in th' way, an' I couldn't make out th' features." He was thinking that it looked more like Dan Hastings than anyone else. "Let's go out an' look under that window," he suggested. "Mebbe we can pick up some tracks."

Wilson quickly procured a lantern and the two men went around and carefully scrutinized the earth where the man had stood. The ground was covered with marks made by the regulation high-heeled Western riding-boot, but was too trampled to furnish further evidence.

Suddenly an object laying to one side caught Quirt's eye. He stooped quickly while Wilson was engrossed with the foot-marks, and slipped it into his pocket, without any comment on his find.

"Nope, I reckon we can't get much outta them marks," Wilson commented, straightening up. They ain't distinctive enough to tell us much. Left heel worn worse'n th' right one, but it'd be a right smart job to run around the country lookin' for a man with them marks. Ye might find a thousand of'm, an' not get th' right one."

It was nearly two hours before Slim and Jerry Quinn returned from their chase, but they had little to report. The mysterious rider's trail had been picked up, but before they could follow fast enough to overcome him, the trail had been lost where it cut across a stretch of hard-pan.

"Well, I reckon I'll be moseyin' along," Quirt announced, after the men had left. "I'll drop out an' see yuh again before long. If anything develops get word to me. So-long."

"So-long," echoed Wilson, as he accompanied Quirt to the door. "Your horse'll be here in a minnit. I reckoned ye'd want him, so I told Slim to bring'm up."

Quirt was well clear of the ranch house before he stopped the horse and took from his pocket the object he had picked up near the window. The flare of a match revealed it to be a small note-book filled with meaningless scribbling, evidently in a code of some sort. On the cover of the book was stamped in gold a small design.

Quirt recognized the note-book at once. He had often seen Stephen Vance making notes in it!

CHAPTER VI

THE match slowly burned away, its dying flicker bringing out a gleam from the gold design on the book as Quirt sat thinking soberly, one leg hooked over the saddle-horn.

The book seemed to be conclusive evidence against Vance, but there was something in Quirt that rebelled at the thought of the blond Englishman attempting such a cowardly attack. Again, the man who fired the shot was, as closely as Quirt could discern, dark. Of course there were such things as wigs, make-ups, disguises. . . .

Quirt dismissed the thought, an impatient shrug giving it scant consideration. Disguises weren't so plentiful in the cow-country.

Finally he settled into the saddle, spoke to the horse, and the animal once more got under way. It plodded slowly along, Quirt's mind too full of thought to urge it to a greater speed.

He had reached a spot in the trail

bordered by heavy brush and chaparral on either side, when a noise back in the undergrowth caught Quirt's ear. The moon was hidden behind a cloud and the night was too dark to make out anything with any certainty, so Quirt decided to investigate. It had been a noise such as any large animal might make, and he thought that, perhaps, a cow had managed to make its way into tangled brush and couldn't get out, for some reason or other.

Quirt reined in the horse and quickly dropping to the ground, made his way to the side of the road and through the tangle of mesquite and tangled brush. Then, before he realized it, he was so close that he ran into a horse, fully saddled. Drawing a match from his pocket he was about to make a light when a twig cracked behind him. Before Quirt could turn a powerful arm was thrown around his neck and a knee crashed into the small of his back!

Strangling, still Quirt kept his head. Reaching up a hand he seized one of his assailant's fingers and forced it out and back, thus breaking the hold. Immediately the arm dropped around Quirt's waist and was joined by the unknown man's other arm, as he tried to lift Quirt from his feet. For a few moments the men struggled back and forth in the darkness, Quirt struggling with might and main to break loose, his opponent working just as hard to force him to the ground.

Suddenly the movement that Quirt had hoped for came. As his adversary shifted to a lower hold, Quirt quickly bent forward from the waist and reaching back between his legs caught hold of his opponent's foot. Taking a firm grasp with both hands he pulled sharply forward. The result of the maneuver threw his assailant back on the ground, Quirt landing on top. At the same instant the hold was broken, and Quirt scrambled over to close with the man, who was by no means finished.

Over and over they rolled through the scratching brush, kicking, panting, grunting. Neither man said a word; each was saving his breath for the ultimate moment when one or the other should gain an advantage. Through the struggle, to Quirt's ears came the nervous snorts of the horse, which was plunging wildly in the darkness of the brush. Fearful that they might roll beneath the sharp-cutting hoofs, Quirt made a supreme effort and broke loose.

Struggling to his feet he reached for his gun which through some miracle had not fallen from the holster.

"Stick 'em up!" he panted. "I'm aimin' to plug yuh if yuh don't."

The words came too late, however, and the gun was discharged harmlessly in the air. Even before he had spoken, the dim form of the other man had left the ground in a long, low dive, and once more Quirt found himself seized around the waist in a rib-cracking grasp.

The shock of the impact was tremendous and the gun was jarred from Quirt's hand. Once more they were battling on even terms, for Quirt was sure the other man had no gun. Else why had he not reached for it when they were separated?

Many times in wrestling bouts with the other punchers of various outfis Quirt had met strong men, but never one with such muscles as this one possessed. Slowly and surely

the grip of steel tightened about him and Quirt felt every moment as though his ribs would cave in.

His breath was coming in short, painful gasps now, a sort of wheezing preceding each expulsion of air. Warm sweat was trickling down into his eyes and the blood was pounding violently in his head. Drums boomed and strange lights flashed and Quirt felt his senses slowly departing. He was nauseated, and the strength seemed to have gone from his limbs leaving them laden and cold.

With a free arm he battered at his opponent's face, sensing meanwhile that the blows were too feeble to do any harm. Finally, putting his last ounce of strength in the attempt, Quirt twisted his leg around the back of the other's knee in the old-fashioned "tripping-hold." The move had its effect. For a second time the two men crashed to the ground.

With the thought of the horse's hoofs dimly warning him, Quirt managed to roll towards the edge of the brush, his opponent carried along with him. Their impetus carried them to the road.

Just as the two went scrambling out into the open the moon passed from behind a cloud, shedding a silver radiance over the two combatants. At the same moment he felt the other man loosen his hold. Quirt, with his head buried beneath the other's chin, continued to exert every muscle, then, becoming aware of the man's loosened grasp, he looked up, and suddenly relaxed.

"Whew!" The exclamation came through Quirt's labored breathing. "Why—why didn't yuh say—somethin'—yuh darned idjit?" he gasped, his form drooping limply to the ground.

The other braced himself uncertainly on one elbow, swayed a moment to regain his balance, then sat upright. "You bally ass—how did I know—it was you," the words came weakly, as a shaking hand fumbled for an eye-glass.

The other man was Stephen Vance!

CHAPTER VII

FOR long they sat in silence, each trying to regain his lost wind. Quirt was the first to move as he reached for his sack of makin's and cigarette papers which he passed over to Vance. Vance rolled a "pill," then handed the sack back to Quirt. Eventually, Vance got to his feet and wearily made his way to his horse, returning in a moment with his canteen which was courteously offered to Quirt. Still, neither of them spoke and only their heavy breathing was to be heard through the sounds of the night.

"You're one fightin' hombre, *amigo mio,*" Quirt congratulated, when he could talk. "That's th' toughest mix-up I ever been in, an' I ain't aimin' to go 'round an' 'round like that with yuh no more. Yuh'd had me out in another minute."

The moon lighted up the grin on Vance's face as he answered, "Yuh're quite top-hole yourself, y'dknow, old chap. I say, it *was* a tidy little bit of mill we had, eh, what?"

"I don't know what kind of mill yuh're talkin' about," Quirt responded ruefully, "but if yuh mean a saw-mill, I reckon yuh're right. I

feel like I'd been put through one." The faces of both men had become severely scratched by the brush during their tussle.

"Oh, blast our personal feelings —all rot, y'know," Vance returned good-humoredly. 'Pink of condition—quick recovery. All that sort of thing. But, damme! I say, old top, I think I've cracked my eyeglass in our scuffling, y'know."

Quirt roared with laughter. "Of all th' crazy galoots I ever seen," he chuckled, "you take top-money. Here we been through a scrap that'd put most men in th' hospital, an' all yuh can find to worry about is th' loss of one small, round window-pane. Me, I'm wonderin' what all th' trouble was about. Let's hear it."

Vance's story was quickly related. He had been sitting at the side of the road when suddenly someone had come from behind out of the brush and struck him over the head. A lump the size of a pigeon's egg at the base of the skull attested that fact. The blow had knocked him unconscious. When he regained his senses he discovered that his gun had been taken and his pockets rifled. He was about to mount when the sound of horse's hoofs announced Quirt's approach. Not knowing how long he had been unconscious Vance thought it was his assailant returning. Then he waited in the brush until Quirt approached near enough and attacked him, the darkness concealing the men's identity from each other.

"—— thought it was the same filthy bounder. Chance to even scores and that sort of thing, y'know. Tried to make you give over. Little too much for me, y' understand."

Quirt mentioned the gun Vance had lost. "I didn't know yuh carried a shootin'-rod," he observed. "Never saw yuh with one."

Vance bit his lip and was silent for a few moments. Finally, "Under-arm gun. .38 calibre. Shoot those chaparral birds, now and then. Bit of the hunting spirit in my blood."

Quirt scoffed at the words. "Yeah he jeered, "I can see yuh gettin' any game with an under-arm gun. It'd look plumb funny to see yuh throwin' down one of them chaparrel hens with a .38. Come again, Stevie. I can't swallow that sort of yarn."

"That sort of—ah—yarn, as you call it," Vance responded calmly, "will have to be sufficient for the present."

QUIRT was appreciating Vance more all the time. There was about him a sense of superiority that graced few men Quirt had encountered in his wanderings. Something big and capable and fine, not given to the ordinary run of men, was found in this tall, lean Britisher. Whether or not Vance was mixed up with the rustlers was a thing apart, Quirt decided. Eventually the trouble would be cleaned up, and he hoped Vance would be able to scrape clear of the mess with a clean slate. If necessary, thought Quirt, warming to the man, he'd do his utmost to get Vance straightened out where he could make a clean start. Then a feeling of loyalty for Tegland pushed that thought from his mind, and he decided he'd better take care of his own job first.

"By the way," he put the next question, "what was yuh doin', sittin' beside th' road here, when this

unknown snake bumped yuh over th' conk?"

"Wanted to have a bit of chat with you. Saw you at the Rocking-Chair. Came back. Waited for you here."

Quirt's eyes widened. "*You* saw me at th' Rockin-Chair? What was yuh doin'? I didn't see *yuh.*"

"Looked through the window of the cook-house. Wanted to see you alone, so came back here to wait."

"Wilson tells me," Quirt observed calmly, "that yuh spend considerable time at th' Rockin'-Chair."

"Quite," Vance answered shortly. "Your American poker intrigues me no end. More—ah—sporting than our bridge. Wilson's punchers like to try my skill on occasion."

Without answering, Quirt came to a sudden decision. He rose and went to his horse. Reaching into the saddle-bag he drew out the piece of calf hide on which the Rocking-Chair mark had been burned over the Lazy-T brand. Then he returned to where Vance still sat in the bright moonlight at the side of the road and handed the evidence to him.

"That's what I went to see Wilson about," Quirt said. "What d'yuh think of it?"

Vance looked interestedly, but with no visible surprise, at the piece of hide. Quirt noticed that he didn't have to explain anything.

"Ah, yes," Vance exclaimed at last. "Bit of rustling, I should say. I've seen something of this kind before."

"What! a Rockin'-Chair blotted over a Lazy-T?"

Vance nodded. "Twice before," he affirmed coolly.

"I suppose," the words came softly, just a hint of sarcasm tinging the tones, "that yuh saw it under th' same circumstances as I did. Th' calf I took that off'n had a broken leg."

"Exactly." The answer came in an unruffled voice. "The animals I saw also had broken legs. Had to shoot'm. Couldn't leave the poor beasties to suffer, y'know."

The word "liar" leaped to Quirt's tongue, but he compressed his lips and said nothing. The audacity of the man! The sheer nerve of anyone acting so calmly in the face of almost indisputable evidence took Quirt's breath away.

"That, Vance," he said at length, and this time there was no mistaking the sarcasm in his voice, "is what yuh might call a coincidence—*a most unusual coincidence!*"

"Coincidences," Vance answered stiffly, "have a habit, y'know, of being *most unusual* sometimes."

By this time Quirt was practically certain that Vance was working with some one on the Rocking-Chair ranch in runing off Tekland's cattle. And yet, if not Wilson, who could it be? As long as rustled stock bore Wilson's brand, Wilson could be the only one to receive any money that might accrue from the sale of such stock.

Quirt sat smoking for some time, then abruptly, "Yuh said yuh wanted to talk to me, Vance. What's on your mind?"

Vance, too, had been pondering deeply some subject. He came to with a jerk. "Ah, yes," he answered, "do you know where the Botella Basin is located?"

Quirt looked at him in surprise. "Yeah, why?"

"I rode over near the west mouth

of the Botella yesterday. Got there about dusk. As I drew near I saw a large cloud of dust. It looked for all the world, y'know, like a herd of cow-creatures being driven in there. I've heard a bit of talk about rustlers — thought perhaps they were stealing those cattle. Didn't want trouble. Got away at once." He eyed Quirt narrowly as he talked.

Quirt was seething inwardly with excitement, but his face remained passive. Botella Basin was a long valley of about thirty-five or forty thousand acres, shaped roughly like a bottle. It lay, about forty miles from the Lazy-T grazing grounds, parallel with the American border, just over the line in Mexican territory.

THE thought came to Quirt that the basin would be ideally suited to rustlers' requirements, as the animals could be run in the small entrance to the valley and hidden there. Later, when a market had been found, they could be driven from the other opening of the valley, which was at the bottom of the bottle, back across the border line to Stanton City, a distance of some fifteen miles. Stanton City was one of the largest shipping points in that section of the country.

Quirt hadn't though of going over the border that far away in search of the rustlers. Inwardly he was perturbed that Vance should have been the one to discover the rustlers' hide-out—if a discovery it was. He wondered why Vance had given him this information. Could it be that the Englishman was leading him into a trap?

"Vance," he inquired at last, exasperation in the tones, "who in th' name of th' seven horned rattlers are yuh?"

"My name," Vance began, "is Stephen——"

"Hell!" Quirt cut in, "I know that, but——"

"That's all there is to tell, then," Vance interrupted placidly. "I'm out here looking for ranch property. Eventually, I may buy. Healthy life—great outdoors—money in cattle—all that sort of thing, old man." There was a queer quirk to Vance's lips that appealed to Quirt's sense of humour.

"Aw, shucks!" he laughed, "go whisper that fairy story to th' sagebrush." Then his face sobered. "Listen, Stevie, you'n me's goin' down an' investigate that Botella Basin. And we ain't goin' alone, either. We're takin' some friends. *My* friends, what we can depend on."

"That," the Englishman answered calmly, "is a very commendable idea, an excellent idea. Friends should prove no end of help to us in case the bally rustlers get nasty—use their firearms—that sort of thing. As for going down there, I expected you would, old chap. That's why I told you."

Quirt looked at him in astonishment. "Well, I'll be——" Then at a loss for words he rose and went to his horse. Vance stepped back in the brush and reappeared leading his mount.

"Where to, old top?"

"Back to the Rocking-Chair," Quirt answered, tightening his cinch. "I reckon mebbe Wilson'll be glad to loan me one or two of his punchers." He was about to mount, when a thought struck him. "Here, Stevie," he said proffering

the Englishman's note-book, "I reckon this belongs to you."

"Oh, my little ol' diary," Vance commented as he accepted the book. "I say, how did you come by it?"

Quirt explained the situation in a few words. "Th' galoot that took th' pot-shot at me," he finished, "must have been the same one that went through your pockets after knockin' yuh on th' head. He probably dropped th' note-book in his rush to get away."

Vance flushed red in the moonlight. "Oh, I say," he commented, "you must have thought I was—ah—growing murderously inclined, what?"

"I knew it wa'n't you as soon as I grabbed hold of your boot when we was fightin'," Quirt explained. "Them boots you wear has got ordinary heels like on all dude ridin' boots. Th' snake that took th' shot at me had reg'lar high-heeled puncher boots.'

They got into saddles and putting spurs to the horses arrived within the hour at the Rocking-Chair. By now, however, the lights were out and the buildings in darkness.

VANCE waited with the horses while Quirt strode up and pounded with heavy fist on the door. Finally, a light appeared at the window and the next moment Wilson had opened the door.

"Huh? Whatchawant?" he demanded sleepily. Then, "Oh, it's you, Quirt."

Quirt explained his errand in a few words, merely making mention that he had a clue as to the rustler's hiding place.

"—— an' yuh see," he finished, "there bein' only two men at th' Lazy-T that I feel like trustin', I thought mebbe yuh'd let me have a coupla of your boys to take along."

"Ye're danged tootin' I will!" Wilson answered heartily, now fully awake. "Ye can have any man in th' outfit, an' I'll go along."

"Tain't necessary," Quirt replied, "an I just want th' men yuh absolutely know is straight. In case they is a crook on your payroll he's liable to get plumb suspicious if you go hittin' leather this time o' night."

"All right, I *sabe,*" Wilson agreed. "Go down to th' bunkhouse an' wake up Slim Terry. Let him pick who yuh want. Slim's been with me goin' on eight year now, an' yuh can trust him with anythin' yuh got."

"Thanks," Quirt answered, "I'll do that."

"Good luck to ye, Quirt," Wilson called as he closed the door.

As Quirt neared the bunkhouse a widely-assorted variety of snores was carried to him on the night breeze. In a few moments he had aroused the occupants, and calling Slim Terry to one side explained what he wanted.

"Purple rattlesnake's kittens!" Slim exulted. "Goin' to get some action at last. It's been right dull around here th' last coupla years. I know just th' ones to take an' they'll be plumb pleased at your invitation, 'specially Jerry Quinn, that fightin' Irisher."

"We won't need more'n a couple—you'n Jerry," Quirt protested.

"Yeah, an I know three more what'll make life plumb miserable for me if I don't let'm in on this. Not that all th' boys ain't straight," Slim added loyally, "only th' ones I'm pickin' is th' dependable kind in case we get into a scrap." And

with that he disappeared into the bunkhouse.

Quirt walked back to where Vance waited, and getting into the saddle rolled a cigarette to kill time until Slim and the others put in an appearance. In less than ten minutes the sounds of ponies' hoofs heralded the appearance of the lanky Slim and four others.

"Ready?" Quirt called.

"Ready, an' rarin' to go," came the answer from Slim, to which were added the replies, in a similar vein, of the other men.

The sun was flaming red in the east above the peaks before the Lazy-T ranch buildings hove into view. Here the trail divided, the way to Botella Basin lying to the south.

Quirt, riding in front, reined in his horse. "I tell yuh what," he suggested, "if th' whole crowd of us rides in, Brad Grimshaw is likely to get wise that somethin' is on th' move. I ain't ready to clash with that hombre yet, so you boys ride over to the shack which Vance an' I shares an' get some breakfast. It's right on our way, so yuh won't be losin' no time. They's plenty of grub there, too. I'll go down an' see Tegland an' pick up a coupla more of th' boys an meet yuh there later. O. K.?"

"Sure, Quirt," Slim agreed for the rest.

"I say, Quirt," Vance called as Quirt started away.

Quirt swung around in the saddle. "Yeah?"

"I'll appreciate your bringing me a holster—and y'know—the rest of the trimmings—cartridges—gun—all that sort of rigging."

"What d'yuh want? A .45?"

Vance smiled almost apologetically. "Not quite. .45's a bit weighty, don't y'think? A .38, if yuh don't mind. Easier to handle. Somethin' like eight ounces in the difference."

"Correct. I'll bring it," Quirt promised, as he started the horse. Then to himself. "That sunuvagun knows guns, or I'm a pie-eyed sheepherder. Looks like little Stevie expects to take a right smart hand in this game. I wonder now which side he'll be on. Shucks! They ain't no use worryin' about that." He had already taken Slim into his confidence and asked him to keep an eye on Vance.

CHAPTER VIII

AS Quirt loped his horse down the long slope of ground that led to the Lazy-T, there came to him on the morning air the cook's long drawn-out cry, "Come on-n-n-n-n- an' git-t-t-t-t-t it . . . ." accompanied by much vigorous beating on a large bread-pan. The men were half through breakfast by the time Quirt had taken care of his horse and entered the cook-house.

Answering their greetings he called to the cook, who a few minutes later brought hi ma heaping plate of flap-jacks. Quirt half expected that Grimshaw would show some curiosity as to his last few days' absence, so he took a seat at the far end of the table with "Tacks" Karpet and "Pal" Stuart, two punchers who had been with Tegland before Grimshaw came to the Lazy-T, and whom he felt he could rightly trust.

At the other end of the long table sat Grimshaw, while on either side of him, plying knife and fork vigorously in a little sword-swallowing act of their own, sat "Rowdy"

Gates and Pete Myers, two hard-looking individuals who had been hired by Grimshaw. They arose from the table a few minutes after Quirt sat down and made their way outside. Shortly afterwards he saw them ride by the cook-house door.

Quirt noticed that Kehoe and Tracy, the two remaining punchers on the Lazy-T payroll were absent from breakfast, but made no comments on their absence. He was sure these two, together with Gates and Myers, were working hand in glove with Grimshaw. There was a surly, insolent way about the four, and Tacks Karpet and Pal Stuart mixed with them as rarely as possible. Grimshaw had tried to discharge Karpet and Stuart on more than one occasion, but Tegland always put his foot down firmly on that point and they stayed on.

At the end of the meal Quirt drew Tacks to one side and explained what he intended doing. While neither Tacks nor Pal knew what Quirt's job really consisted of, they had liked him from the first and in their odd moments had talked over the matter between themselves and drawn their own inferences, with the result that they had more or less reached the conclusion that Quirt was on the Lazy-T to clean out the rustlers.

"Get hold of Pal an' both of yuh beat it out to my shack," Quirt finished, as they passed into the open air, leaving Grimshaw still at the table. "Yuh'll find th' other boys waitin' for yuh there. Tell'm I'll be along just as soon as I've seen Tegland. An' keep your mouth shut, so's Grimshaw won't get wise. Yuh better sneak away before he gets a chance to give yuh some job that might keep yuh here." That had been Grimshaw's habit when dealing with Tacks and Pal.

"I got yuh, Quirt," Tacks answered. "Me'n Pal's just been achin' to get in on some of your stuff." He winked broadly at Quirt as he said the words. "We'll be movin' *pronto.*"

Quirt smiled at the wink but said nothing except, "I'll be with yuh later, then. Mebbe yuh'll need it an' mebbe yuh won't, but yuh better take plenty ammunition with yuh."

Then he made his way up to the ranch house, where he found Tegland and Maurine. After their greetings had been answered, Quirt told Tegland what had been learned and detailed his plans.

A LOOK of concern came into the girl's eyes as he talked. Quirt felt as though he'd be willing to give his life to put a smile there instead. At the same time he hoped her concern was for him, but feared otherwise. The thought intruded on what he was saying to Tegland and he found it difficult to concentrate.

"Yuh see," he was saying awkwardly, "I just aim to ride down there an' see what it's all about. Mebbe Vance is O. K., an' mebbe he's laid a trap of some sort. That's why I'm takin' a few of th' boys with me."

"It is good of you — and the others — to risk your lives for us," Maurine said. "I don't know what we'd do without you, Quirt. You seem to have given Dad new courage." This was true. From the time Quirt had taken the job Tegland had improved. The thought that he had someone upon whom he could depend, a man to shoulder some of the responsibility had

worked wonders with the ranch owner. Day by day his condition mended; already the racking cough when Quirt arrived, had disappeared.

Tegland nodded at Maurine's words. "Th' gal's sayin' a heap, Quirt. I been thinkin' that for a long time."

"Aw, shucks!" Quirt laughed. "They ain't goin' to be any danger, Miss Maurine. We're just ridin' down there to see what they is to see. Probably won't be no gun-play at all. So rest easy—we'll be back in tip-top shape."

She smiled, not entirely reassured by the words. "I find it hard to believe anything bad of Stephen Vance," she continued. "I enjoyed talking to him when he stayed here, and despite his queer English ways, he was never anything but a thorough gentleman."

"Vance's a gentleman, all right," Quirt grudingly admitted. "An' I gotta admit I find myself likin' him a lot. Jest th' same his actions is plumb suspicious sometimes."

He talked to Tegland for some time longer and then drifted down to the corral for a horse, his mind full of Maurine Tegland, rather than stolen cattle.

As he rode past the house Maurine hailed him. Before he could dismount she was at his side, cheeks flushed.

"I just wanted to say, Quirt," her words came to him softly, with a sort of nervous tension, "that I hope no one will be hurt." A suspicious moisture welled into her eyes, but she went bravely on. I suppose I'm foolish to worry after what you've said, but then, that's a woman's privilege, isn't it?"

It was all Quirt could do to restrain himself from leaving the horse and taking her into his arms. Her very nearness seemed to lend him new strength. It was only the thought of the hours she'd spent with Vance, hours which she appeared to remember with tenderness, that dammed the flow of words that rose to his lips.

"Gosh, yes, Miss Maurine," he assured, "we'll be O. K."

"And—and keep an eye on Mr. Vance," she murmured. "As long as he's staying at the Lazy-T I feel responsible for his safety."

All the color left Quirt's face. He felt a sinking sensation in the region of his stomach. "And suppose," he said, speaking with difficulty, "suppose Vance is one of the rustlers."

"Even so," she answered gently, "I feel that he must have been led into it. He's new to the country, and—somehow he's different from the usual type of thief. You know, Quirt, there's always a reason for a good man going wrong. I feel that even if Vance is guilty of what we—you—suspect, there should be a chance for him. I can't forget how kind and considerate he was to Dad in the days before you came."

"I reckon you're right, Miss Maurine." The words came hard. "I'm hopin' we won't have any trouble of that kind."

"And don't forget, Quirt, that I want you, too, to come back safely," she added in lighter tones, "you and the rest of the boys. But you know what to expect. To you the range and all that goes with it is an old story, and always will be——" She broke off abruptly and forced a gayer tone into her words, "There, I'm keeping you when you want to

be going. Good luck, Quirt."

Maurine hesitated a moment as though expecting him to speak, but he only looked dumbly straight ahead. She turned swiftly to hide her tears and ran into the house.

"I hope for her sake," Quirt murmured to himself, "that Vance is a square-shooter. If not—well, I reckon I'll have to change him, that's all."

With an effort he brought his mind back to reality and spoke to the horse, which broke into movement. As he rode over the trail a feeling of envy tinged with resentment slowly began to form in his heart. It wasn't so much a feeling for what Vance was or might be. It was an emotion based on the fact that Maurine appeared to care for the blond Englishman. In short it was pure selfishness on Quirt's part, and he realized it shortly.

"Shucks, horse," he spoke his thought aloud, "I ain't givin' that hombre a square shake nohow. I'm feeling plumb mean towards him, an' all because I'm kinda sore."

CHAPTER IX

IT WAS past noon when he reached the linecamp cabin where the others awaited him. Their horses were tethered out in front and Quirt sa wthey were ready to move.

As he entered Vance was in the act of serving drinks. "Greetings, old top," he called, moving over to Quirt with seltzer-bottle, Three-Star, and a glass, "you're just in time to lift a peg with us."

Quirt looked around and saw the other men eyeing the Englishman with wide-eyed amazement. "Yuh don't want to let this Johnnie Bull surprise yuh none, waddies. He's allus pullin' new drinks on me, too, but I'm gettin' sort of used to it. What yuh got this time, Stevie?"

"This," Vance replied, as he foamed the seltzer into the glass of brandy, "is what comprises the earliest breakfast and latest dinner of the British Empire, namely, brandy-and-soda. Drinking our liquor bare—ah—straight, as you call it, hasn't yet become a habit over there, as it has here."

"Not bad," Quirt commented, as he downed the glass after the preliminary sip. "I suppose this came from 'Frisco 'long with them other ingredients yuh used in makin' them Unbranded Mavericks coupla days back."

"Quite right. Fancy, living in a country where one is forced to send such a distance for one's—ah—reinforcements! I like the country, though, 'pon my word, I do. Shall we lift another before starting?"

"I'll take mine bare this time," Slim Terry grinned, stretching forth his glass.

"Me, too," from Tacks Karpet. "I ain't sayin' nothin' against your taste, mister, but right now brandy-and-sody taste kinda soapy to me."

Vance filled glasses all around and then looked queerly at Quirt, who was holding his nose while he drank. "I say, old man, what's the idea of all that? Don't you care for the odor?"

Quirt grinned as he sat the empty glass on the table. "Well, rawther," he mimicked in his slow drawl. "It's simply rippin', ol' chawp. Howevah, when I smell such excellent likker, y'know, it always makes my bally mouth water, and I don't care to dilute my drink, y'understand."

Vance joined in the roar of laugh-

ter that greeted Quirt's answer, then the men rolled cigarettes and prepared to leave. Quirt gave Vance the gun he had brought for him and a few minutes later the men were in the saddle, headed towards the Border.

As the little cavalcade crossed mile after mile of sage brush and cactus under the flaming sun, little was said of the matter at hand. To an observer, unacquainted with the ways of the range, they would have appeared to be headed on a pleasure jaunt of some kind.

The horses, at first eager to go, galloped swiftly over the country, then finally settled down to a long distance-covering lope that carried the men nearer and nearer to the purple ridges, hazy in the distance.

Eventually, as the hours passed, the country became more broken and they began to enter timber country. Then they struck a winding, twisting grade, in itself level as a floor, but passing between huge peaks rearing their indomitable heads. Here the horses dropped to a plodding gait as the going became more rough along the inclines.

It was late afternoon before the entrance to Botella Basin was sighted. In time they came to two tall rocks that stood, seemingly like guards, at either side of the bottle-neck-like opening to the valley.

As the horses descended a well-worn trail that led down into the basin, Quirt kept a keen lookout ahead for the rustlers. "Cattle been along here, all right. Plenty of'm," he called, noticing tracks.

Then as the bottle-neck suddenly spread out and they rounded a tall clump of cottonwoods an exclamation escaped his lips.

There at the bottom of a long, gentle slope lay spread before them a smooth floor of meadow land. All around loomed mountain peaks, but the bottom of the basin was a fertile green, no doubt irrigated by small mountain streams that seeped down from time to time.

Dotted here and there as far as his vision reached, Quirt could see bunches of cattle. He abruptly drew rein, the others doing likewise. At one side of the valley about three-quarters of a mile away, smoke was curling lazily upward in thin blue spirals, through the pines.

"I reckon we better wait 'til night, an' then sneak up——" Quirt started to say, when the vicious hum of a bullet with its accompanying crack of a distant rifle cut short the sentence!

"Anybody hit?" Quirt cried, wheeling around in the saddle. For a moment no one replied. All of the men were gazing straight ahead down into the basin, lips tightly compressed, some of them drawing guns.

"All top-hole, I believe," Vance answered at last. There was an odd note in the Englishman's voice and Quirt looked sharply at him. Vance was sitting erect, but a shade of chalk was creeping up under his tan and there was a queer look on his face.

A look of scorn passed into Quirt's features. "Touch of the yellow streak comes out when he's under fire," he mentally commented; then aloud, "Well, they've seen us. Might just as well go down and investigate th' hombres what are runnin' this show."

He put spurs to the horse and got under way, followed by the others whooping and yelling like mad. As

they tore along small bunches of cattle, startled by the intruders, broke into a run. Quirt noticed as he swung aside to avoid a wild-eyed steer that the animal bore the Lazy-T brand.

At the same instant two men on horseback broke from the cover of the pines where the smoke had been seen.

"There's two of 'm," Pal Stuart yelled, yanking his gun from the holster and vigorously working the trigger.

"Save your lead, cowboy," Jerry Quinn shouted advice through the din of niose, smoke and dust. "Yuh can't touch'm at this distance." The first shot had gotten two or three of the others started and they, too, were heating gun-barrels and wasting lead.

Through the commotion came the bawling of the cows as they broke from under trees and went galloping awkwardly, terror - stricken, down the valley ahead of the horsemen. The herd was rapidly bunching, and tossing horns and terrified snorts proclaimed a stampede unless the noise quieted down.

No more shots were fired at Quirt and his men, and as no more rustlers had broken cover, Quirt decided they had only these two men to contend with. The fleeing rustlers were rapidly getting up ahead of the milling cattle. Their horses were fresh, as Quirt had noticed quite a string as he passed their hiding place among the pines. The horses of Quirt's crowd having been in service for several hours were growing tired. The fact that the pursuers had to swerve aside from time to time to avoid the running cattle did much to give the rustlers an advantage, once they had passed the cattle that were before them.

Quirt, Tacks Karpet and Vance, being better mounted than the rest, began to forge ahead, once they had gotten around the cattle. The scenery flashed by as these three commenced to gain on the rustlers. Quirt raised himself in the saddle and gazed back. Slim Terry was nearest to him.

"You boys," Quirt shouted to Slim, "better get them cows rounded up before they begin rollin' their tails. We'll take care of these measly coyotes up ahead."

As the words were carried back to Slim, he checked his horse and, swinging, relayed Quirt's orders to the ones behind. In a few minutes they had turned to the business of quieting the cattle.

This responsibility lifted from Quirt's shoulders, he once more settled his attention to the business of capturing the two rustlers.

SUDDENLY, seeing that they were losing ground, the rustlers guided their horses up the slope at one side of the valley, where a small opening in the rocks offered shelter. As the incline became steep and rocky, making perilous footing for the horses, one of the men leaped from the saddle and started running awkwardly up the steep hillside of jagged outcrop. In an instant he was followed by the other.

"Up, up, they went, picking their way quickly between shaggy boulders. It began to look as though they'd reach the protection of the cut in the hillside. Once there, they could shoot from cover with the probability of picking off Quirt and the other two. That accomplished, and the remainder of the men being occupied far in the rear with the

cattle, escape would be a simple matter.

The foremost man had almost reached the opening in the rock when Tacks' gun left its holster and the roar of the .45 echoed through the valley. The rustler stumbled to his knees, got up, scrambled on for a few steps, then suddenly dropped face downward.

Tacks let out a cry of exultation, "I reckon that's some shootin'," he shouted with pardonable pride. Again he pulled the trigger, but the remaining rustler continued his flight unscathed. The motion of the horse had spoiled Tacks' aim. Luck had more than a little to do wtih his first shot.

"Hold your fire," Quirt yelled, adding something about "live evidence." Even as he spoke he was shaking out the lariat that hung at his saddle. Guiding the horse with his knees he forced the animal rapidly up the dangerous ascent of loose stones and sliding gravel, the rope spreading in ever-widening circles as it revolved above Quirt's head. The horse was still scrambling upwards when Quirt released the loop. Straight through the air the noose flew, all the accuracy of years of training in the throw, and settled gracefully around the rustler's shoulders, pinning one arm to his side.

At the same time the horse dropped back to its haunches and the rope tightened. The rustler's heels dscribed a neat arc in the air, and he was snapped to the ground.

For a moment the man lay as though stunned, as Quirt leaped from the saddle and scrambled up the hill to disarm him. Then, without rising, the rustler suddenly sat upright, and with his free arm yanked a gun out of his holster.

Quirt was caught flat-footed and expected every second to feel the sting of lead as he fumbled at his gun. Then Vance's gun spoke, the .38 crashing viciously. A look of surprise appeared on the rustler's face and he screamed with pain as his weapon fell from nerveless fingers. He looked dumbly down at the slowly-trickling crimson stream that dripped from finger-ends, then groaned, "Don't shoot again. I give up."

For the first time Quirt noticed that the man was "Rowdy" Gates, one of the Lazy-T punchers who had left the breakfast table shortly after Quirt had entered the cookhouse that same morning. Now he looked up the incline where the other rustler lay, to see if he, too, was a Lazy-T man. He was. It was Pete Myers!

Tacks Karpet had left his horse and was examining the body when he glanced over and caught Quirt's eye. Hel! Quirt," he called, "it's Pete Myers!" Then looking at Quirt's capture, "That's Gates yuh got, ain't it? Well, I'll be everlastingly blasted!"

"Myers finished?" Quirt asked.

"Naw!" came the disgusted reply. "I just parted his hair for'm. He's comin' to, now."

Quirt got Gates to his feet and they started down the side of the hill, followed by Tacks, who was assisting Myers. Gates had had his fore-arm broken by Vance's bullet.

"It looks right bad. for yuh, Gates," Quirt remarked.

"I reckon you're right, Quirt," the man spoke weakly, all the fight gone out of him, "but I ain't th' only one what's mixed in this affair. Mebbe yuh'll go easy on me if I can

give yuh some information that yuh probably been lookin' for."

"That's what we're after, information," Quirt answered grimly.

They reached the bottom of the slope and in a few minutes came up to Vance, who had dismounted and was leaning against his horse.

"Much obliged, Stevie," Quirt thanked him. "I reckon yuh fired just in time."

"Quite all right, old man," Vance answered, fumbling at his ever-present eyeglass, his lips twisting into a queer grimace. "Afraid the beastly rotter might do you in, if I didn't let 'im have it—"

THE last words came stumblingly and the man's face went white. Suddenly his eyes closed and Vance slipped limply to the ground!

"What th' devil!" Quirt exclaimed, leaping forward and dropping at the Englishman's side. "What's wrong, Stevie?"

He loosened the man's collar, then as Vance's jacket fell back, a slowly-spreading stain of red was disclosed on the tan shirt.

Quirt turned and noticed Gates looking on with interest, then he shouted to Tacks, "Hey, Tacks, kinda keep your eye on this coyote I corraled, will yuh, while I 'tend to Vance? Somethin's went plumb wrong with 'm."

Tacks called assent and Quirt turned back to the Englishman. Getting a canteen he wet his bandanna and carefully bathed Vances forehead. It was a puzzle to Quirt. How had Vance become wounded? Then he remembered the rifle shot when they had first entered the valley. At the same time Vance said everything was all right. He had lied gamely that the chase might not be held up.

Quirt remembered now that Vance had looked rather strange at the time. A wave of remorse swept over him. "May I be hung for a dirty, yellow-bellied sheepherder," he mentally condemned himself. "I thought he was yellow. God! but he's game! An' probably saved me bein' shot-up in th' bargain."

He looked down at the still figure as he slit open Vance's shirt to examine the wound. Somehow, he know now that Vance was straight. All differences between them were swept away. Everything was all right, and he realized for the first time how much Vance's friendship meant to him. They had been growing closer as the days sped by, and Quirt cursed himself unrelentingly for not seeing it before.

A slow breath of relief left his lips as he located the bullet. It was lodged between the ribs on the left side. The wound was bleeding freely, and after a few minutes' further examination Quirt decided that Vance had fainted from loss of blood. It wasn't serious, and once the bullet was out it would take but a few days to put the man on his feet. A feeling of tenderness swept over Quirt as he quickly cut the unstained portion of shirt into strips and bound up the wound as best he could, working as carefully as possible.

As he worked a hail came from Tacks Karpet. "What's wrong with Johnnie Bull? Too many brandy-sodys, or overcome with fright?"

In an instant Quirt was on his feet running swiftly toward Tacks, his eyes blazing. His voice shook with a sudden cold rage when he spoke. "Yuh're takin' that back

pronto, Tacks. Vance's a friend of mine, an' I can lick any man what says he's yellow. *Get that straight!"*

"Hell, Quirt, I didn't mean nothin'. I was — was just foolin'," Tacks stammered, taken aback by Quirt's manner. "I reckon I'm sorry if I said somethin' that don't fit in right."

"It's all right, Tacks," Quirt relented. "I am apt to misjudge a man myself sometimes. I wouldn't 'a' spoke so sudden-like only I think a powerful lot of Stevie. Hell, man, he's got a slug of lead in'm."

By the time Quirt had finished bandaging Vance the other men had come up. The cattle had been quieted down and the men were earger to learn what had happened to Vance and the two rustlers.

One of the men produced a flask and a few drops were forced down Vance's throat. He groaned, then opened his eyes. A look of surprise flooded his face as he noted the circle of heads bent above him, then he struggled up.

"Easy, easy, old man," Quirt advised, taking hold of his arm. "Feel better?"

"Top-hole," came the answer, through pain-twisted lips, as he tried to smile. "Beastly awkward —of me—to slip off—in such silly fashion."

In a short time he felt better, and they braced him comfortably against a tree while Gates' and Myers' wounds were attended to in rough cowboy fashion.

"Them was mostly our cows," Pal Stuart volunteered the information, when the excitement had died down, "though they was a few other brands scattered among'm."

"They was sure a heap of animals cut from Tegland's herd, all right," Jerry Quinn added. "Th' rustlers took more than they left.

Meanwhile Quirt and Tacks had been questioning Myers and Gates. With a few threats and many suggestions to prompt them, the two rustlers confessed freely. The huge herd which was being held in the valley was only a portion of the animals they had intended stealing. Brad Grimshaw was the head of the gang which, with the exception of Tacks and Pal Stuart, included every puncher on the Lazy-T. Counting Grimshaw, this made five in the band that had raided Tegland's herd with such devastating results.

Grimshaw's plans, if carried out, would have resulted in the stealing of practically every Lazy-T cow on the range, according to Gates. This was rustling on a larger scale than was usually attempted. They had intended to start changing brands the next day, and when the remainder of the herd had been stolen and branded, they were to have been driven to and shipped from Stanton City, just as Quirt has suspected.

It had been Grimshaw's plan to have two of the rustlers go to the range two mornings a week, pick up a bunch of stock and drive the animals to Botella Basin, before returning to the ranch. Two of the men always stayed with the cattle until they were relieved by the other two men driving in another bunch of cattle. Grimshaw had grown nervous and had had Gates and Myers go direct to the basin that morning, without running off any cattle, to see if everything was safe. Arriving there the two rustlers had agreed to stay over, while Kehoe and Tracy returned to the ranch.

Grimshaw often took part in the

rustling, but as a general rule he stayed at the Lazy-T to avoid suspicion.

With the information they had gathered, Quirt, Vance and Tacks started for Kirktown, taking the wounded rustlers with them. The other men were left behind to drive the cattle back to the Lazy-T grazing grounds, which would prove to be considerable of a job for six men.

By the time the entrance to the valley was reached the moon had already commenced to make its luminous way across the evening sky.

CHAPTER X

IT was past two in the morning when Quirt and his party rode into Kirktown. Vance was in a bad way by the time they reached the doctor's residence. The wound had been an awkward one to bandage and had continued to bleed despite all Quirt could do. Consequently, by the time they arrived Vance was so weak he was swaying like a drunken man in the saddle. This, of course, could hardly be avoided, as they had pushed their horses to the utmost.

After some pounding at the door the medical man was aroused, and while Tacks stayed to see that the rustlers made no attempt to escape, Quirt went for the sheriff.

A new sheriff had been elected to office since Quirt had first drifted into Kirktown, nearly a year before. The new officer of the law was a good man, and was doing his best to clean out the lawless element that infested the town at the time he took office.

Quirt quickly explained the situation to him, so there would be no chance of his holding Vance or Tacks for the shooting of the rustlers, and the sheriff and his deputy accompanied Quirt back to the doctor's office, prepared to take Gates and Myers to the town jail as soon as the doctor had dressed their wounds.

When the sheriff and his deputy arrived, Tacks and Quirt got ready to leave. Vance was so weak that the doctor insisted on keeping him at his house until such time as he recovered strength enough to be moved.

Quirt knew that he and Tacks had some hard riding to do if they were to reach the Lazy-T before Grimshaw sent the other two men out. If Kehoe and Tracy weren't stopped before they'd left the ranch they'd get to the basin to find not only the cows but their comrades gone also. If that happened they'd know something had gone amiss and spoil Quirt's plans. There were a few other things not quite clear in Quirt's mind, but as the captured rustlers hadn't been able to throw any light on the subject, he decided there was nothing to be done until Grimshaw could be questioned.

After watering the horses, Quirt and Tacks quickly got into saddles and started for the Lazy-T. Both men knew what lay before them, and they settled down to ride as they had never ridden before.

Mile after mile flashed beneath the horses' hoofs as the night riders thundered along under the stars. Neither man spoke as Kirktown drifted farther and farther to the rear. Quirt had already made his plans and confided them to Tacks, so there was little need for conversation. Each man knew what to do, and what the other would do.

At dawn they reached a small stream and stopped to water the panting horses. The animals waded in knee-deep to drink, while Quirt and Tacks dropped prone on their stomachs at the edge of the stream.

"Frozen puppies! that tastes good," Tacks said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, as the two men once more got to their feet. Then he gave vent to a short laugh. "Yuh're sure one tough-lookin' two-gun man, cowboy," he chuckled, as his eyes ran over Quirt's figure.

They had taken the rustlers' guns and now each swung a long, wicked .45 at each hip. Quirt, haggard and drawn, his face caked with grime, sweat and alkali, after two sleepless nights, shifted his weight wearily. He looked whipped, thoroughly beaten in the cold, gray light of morning, but in his eyes still shone the indomitable laugh that had always carried him through a winner, despite overwhelming opposition.

"Yuh look kinda hard yourself, Tacks," he smiled grimly, again stooping down and drenching his face with handfuls of the icy water.

A FEW minutes later they had retightened cinches and once more climbed into the saddle. The water and short rest had done the horses a world of good. Now, they tossed tehir heads, as the fresh morning breeze swept down from the hills, and settled into a long distance-annihilating gait, their legs moving rhythmically with the precision of machines.

Long before they reached the ranch the faint tinny sounds of cookie's breakfast announcement reached their ears. Sounds carry far in the clear morning air, and Quirt knew they'd be too late unless they could get a final burst of speed out of the loyal cow-ponies, which were again fast tiring. There was still some distance to travel.

"We'll have to get another spurt outta these hosses," Quirt shouted to Tacks. Tacks nodded and put spurs to the sweat-streaked gray he was riding. The horse's strides lengthened instantly and Quirt bent low over his buckskin's head as he, too, felt his horse respond to the urge.

When they arrived, the sounds issuing from the cook-house was the only noise to be heard around the buildings. Straight down past the ranch house the two riders dashed, pulling their panting, foam-flecked mounts back to their very haunches at the door of the cook-house.

Then, leaping from saddles, guns drawn, Quirt and Tacks burst through the door.

As they entered, Brad Grimshaw half rose from the table and the two punchers sitting with him looked up, startled. One of them started up, as if knowing what was coming, then sank down and noisily gulped his cup of steaming coffee.

"Put 'em up!" Quirt barked. "Keep your hands away from that gun, Brad. Stick your hand in th' air. *Quick! I'm shootin' if yuh don't!*"

Slowly the three men settled in their chairs, hands raised high above heads, gazing with dismay on their faces into the menacing muzzles of the four guns. Around the corner of the door leading to his kitchen, the cook stared with open-eyed amazement and drooping jaw.

"Take their shootin'-irons,

Tacks," Quirt ordered next. "If any of 'em show fight, slam 'm in th' beezer."

"Hey, what's th' big idea," Grimshaw roared, finding his voice at last. The other two men also growled something under their breaths.

QUIRT laughed, but the sound held no merriment. "Just this, Grimshaw. Th' game's up. Your little get-rich-quick scheme is higher'n a kite. Yuh won't rustle no more cows down into Botella Basin. We been down there an' th' animals are on their way back to th' home range now."

"Hell! I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," Grimshaw answered, his eyes gleaming wickedly as he gazed at the guns which Tacks had just placed on the table.

"No?" Again Quirt laughed easily as he drew up his body and sat on the table, one leg swinging idly at the side. "Now that's plumb funny. I had a talk with Gates and Myers last night an' they admitted a heap of things." His eyes switched to the other two. "Yuh're implicated, Tracy, an' you, too, Kehoe." The men said nothing, but grew visibly paler.

"Look here," Grimshaw blustered, trying in vain to bluff his way out of the mess, "yuh can't scare me into saying a thing."

"Yuh might care to know," Quirt continued carelessly, tilting his six-shooter a trifle so that it was aimed directly where Grimshaw could look into its black muzzle, "that Gates an' Myers got a taste of lead to encourage their talkin'. Now, I don't want to shoot you boys up any, but——" He let his words drift off, but the silence that followed was more convincing than all the threats in the world.

Tracy and Kehoe broke down first and confessed their part in the rustling. That started it. With a voice shaking as though he had the ague Brad Grimshaw came through with his story, stopping now and then to plead for mercy.

"That's fine," Quirt congratulated when he had finished. "Now, there's just one thing I want to know, Grimshaw. Who's back of yuh?"

"Huh?" Brad Grimshaw tried to express surprise. "They ain't no body——"

"Don't lie," Quirt ordered in curt tones. "Grimshaw, you ain't got th' head to carry out rustlin' on such a big scale. They's somebody else in this game that yuh ain't come clean about. Bein' as yuh ain't mentioned them, I judge they got some cash, and yuh figger on them gettin' yuh outta this mess——'

A sudden snarl from Tracy cut short the sentence. "That's why we ain't been gettin' more money outta this deal, eh?" he growled savagely. "I allus thought it was funny Brad runnin' a game like this."

Kehoe, too, looked surprised, so Quirt felt sure they could give him no information on the subject.

"They wa'n't nobody in it but me," Grimshaw protested, but not meeting Quirt's eyes.

"Prod 'm a bit with your six-gun," Tacks suggested. "Mebbe that'll make 'm talk."

"I got somethin' better than that, Tacks," he drawled. He drew out his Durham and calmly rolled a cigarette and lit it, then as the gray smoke curled lazily from his nos-

trils, "Brad, I been lookin' yuh up a heap since we got acquainted, an' I've learned a coupla things that ain't generally known around these parts."

Quirt paused impressively and again fanned his lungs deeply with the smoke before continuing. "Somethin' over six years ago they was a bank robbed up in Kansas City. They got th' galoot what done it, but he escaped. Know anything about that? A little over seven years ago a feller by the name of Bradley Shaw was wanted up in Montana——"

"That's enough, that's enough," Grimshaw almost howled. "Don't go no further, Quirt," he pleaded. "I'll tell yuh everythin' I know. Don't say no more. They ain't no use lettin' these hombres know everythin'. I'll talk to yuh alone."

Kehoe and Tracy were bound securely and locked in the barn by Tacks. Meanwhile Quirt had dispatched the cook up to the ranch house for Tegland.

By the time Tegland arrived, Grimshaw was weak as a child and had wilted entirely. Then he talked for a solid hour. Tegland's eyes grew wider and wider every minute as the story was related.

IT WAS Dan Hastings who headed the gang, Hastings and Lee Stillman! All that Grimshaw confessed and more. Hastings had gotten in touch with Grimshaw, shortly after Quirt had been over to the Bar-H, and warned Brad that Quirt might make trouble, but the greedy foreman had been so sure that Quirt and he would some day throw in together that he had not heeded the warning, thinking that Quirt's visit had to do only with personal differences.

When Grimshaw had finished talking, Quirt tied him up and removed him to the barn with the other two. Then he talked to Tegland for some time, before starting for the Bar-H.

"Yuh better wait an' get some rest, Quirt," Tegland protested. "Let th' sheriff go after Hastings an' Stillman. Yuh done enough for me already. They ain't no use runnin' into no more danger."

"We can't waste time waitin' for th' sheriff," Quirt answered. "We gotta move fast." Tacks had insisted on accompanying him, and Quirt had been too weary to protest.

He and Tacks made their way quickly to the corral, where fresh horses were procured and saddled, while Tegland went back to the house to acquaint Maurine with the facts.

As Quirt and Tacks came past the house they saw Tegland waiting for them.

"By th' way," Quirt suggested, as they came to a stop at Tegland's side, "yuh better have th' cook or Miss Maurine ride in an' tell th' sheriff to come after Grimshaw an' them other two. Don't take no chances on them escaping."

Tegland nodded. "Maurine's goin' in. She just got up, an' as soon as she's dressed she's goin' to ride into Kirktown an' see th' sheriff. She's havin' Vance brought out here, too, where she can nurse him herself. Says they ain't nobody in town could take care of him proper. I don't know what to think about that. Vance may be mixed up with

th' rustlers. He ain't explained nothin' to yuh, yet."

Quirt's lips tightened and his eyes hazed with pain for a moment. Then he smiled down at Tegland. "I'm tellin' yuh somethin,' Mr. Tegland," he said seriously. "Vance ain't explained nothin' yet, but he will in time, an' Im right sure we won't be disappointed. That hombre's all O. K. Why, man, he don't have to explain to me, if he don't want to. He's straight. *I feel it!*" He broke off abruptly, then went on. "We oughta be back by to-night at the latest. It ain't goin' to take Tacks an' me long to round up them two snakes."

"Maurine wants to see you boys before you leave——"

"We'll see her when we come back," Quirt answered shortly. He was well aware of his bedraggled appearance and had no desire to have the girl see him at the present moment. Such is the vanity of man.

Tegland reached up and shook their hands. "I reckon I ain't ever goin' to be able to thank yuh, boy, but yuh know how I feel——"

"Aw, shucks," Quirt grinned awkwardly, "I ain't askin' for no thanks. For the first time in my worthless life I feel that mebbe I'm doin' somethin' worth while. I'm kinda findin' myself as yuh might say, an' feel like I'm a man, 'stead of just a kid."

A look of concern came into Tegland's eyes. "Well, be careful boys. A rattler can do a heap of harm if he sees yuh first."

"Don't worry."

The men spoke to their horses, and with a brief "Adios!" swung out over the wagon-rutted road leading to the trail that disappeared between the hills in the direction of the Bar-H.

Once more the two men drove their mounts at a furious rate of speed across the prairie. Then as they got into the foot-hills of the Valdoze Range they slacked speed. Farther on the ponies were allowed to pick their own gait, lest they take a tumble while picking their perilous way through the steep slashes in the walls of rock.

Eventually the two men came through without mishap, and there lay the Bar-H outfit spread out before them.

The place looked deserted as they rode in. Quirt leaped from his horse followed by Tacks, and strode into the house without knocking.

He had reached the back of the house when a noise at an inner door caused him to turn suddenly. There stood Lee Stillman framed in the doorway.

"What's the idea, Carlyle, comin' into a man's house this way?" he demanded insolently. "There's a door to knock at where you can learn where you're welcome or not.

QUIRT disregarded the words. "Where's Hastings?" he snapped.

"He's not here," Stillman said, turning pale, "and I don't know where he is."

"That's a lie."

Stillman shrugged his shoulders and looked blankly at the two men but said nothing. Quirt waited a moment and then with drawn gun brushed past the man and through the door.

All around the inner room were evidences of preparations for flight. Clothes and papers were flung

helter-skelter, and an open hand-bag stood on the floor, packed to overflowing. Quirt knew that Stillman was getting ready to leave.

"Look here, Stillman," he said, returning to the room, "th' game's up. Yuh ain't goin' to get rich on Lazy-T cows no more. Yuh might just as well talk. Knowin' Dan Hastings like I do, I gotta hunch he's beat it an' left you to hold th' bag. Take my advice an' tell us what yuh know. Grimshaw has told quite a bit, but we'd like a few more details."

At the mention of Grimshaw's name Stillman wilted, and his jaw sagged. He looked quickly from man to man to see if they were bluffing. He decided they weren't and then he broke.

"I know when I'm licked," he cried in panicky tones. "I told the truth, though, when I said Hastings had left. It was all his fault in the first place. I didn't have nothin' to do with it. I didn't know—honestly, so help me God!—it was a crooked deal from the first. I told Hastings I wouldn't go in with him——"

"Easy, easy," Quirt admonished. "Take your time, Stillman, an' let's have this talk straight."

Gradually they got the man quieted and he told all he knew, thus clearing up in Quirt's mind several things that had puzzled him. Hastings had gone down into Botella Basin, arriving there some time after the cattle had been driven back. He had at once burned daylight getting back to the Bar H and warned Stillman that something was wrong, and after getting some money, had immediately left.

"——and I don't suppose he'd come back to warn me at all," Stillman was saying, "only I had all the money in the safe and he wanted his half. I didn't think you boys would work this fast, or I'd been gone, too. Now, it's all his fault, and it's not right that I should be left to face the music alone. In the hurry he stole Tegland's paper that I was holding for the Lazy-T ——."

"Listen, mister," Tacks cut in heatedly, "that paper won't be no good now, anyway. After what you've told us——"

"Yuh can't tell what a court might do," Quirt interrupted more calmly. "That paper might cause Tegland a heap of trouble. Anyway, we want Hastings, too, if we can get him. How long's he been gone, Stillman?"

"He left about two hours before you got here. He was heading west. Go after him and bring him back, Carlyle. It's not right that I should have to take all the blame."

"That ain't worryin' me none," Quirt cut in grimly. "With Grimshaw an' th' rest yuh'll have plenty company. Howsomever, I'm goin' after that sneakin' coyote."

"But, Quirt," Tacks protested, "yuh'll be all in, if yuh find 'm. Yuh ain't had no sleep for two nights, an' nothin' much to eat. Yuh better wait——"

"Me, I'm all right," Quirt laughed, but his looks belied his words. "Tacks, you take Stillman over to the Lazy-T. I'll see yuh later." He turned to go, then swung back to Stillman. "I'm borryin' one of your horses, Stillman. Yuh get that information now, so's yuh won't be bringin' any counter-charges of horse-swipin' against me."

"Take them, Carlyle, or anything

else you need. Only for God's sake bring Hastings back."

But the words were lost upon Quirt who, with a hasty clasp of Tacks hands, had disappeared through the door.

CHAPTER XI

QUIRT got a fresh horse from the corral and mounting his own, led the Bar-H horse out to the road. After riding a couple of miles he dismounted and picked up Hasting's trail. Then, remounting, he settled down grimly to the chase.

All that day and far into the night he rode, changing horses at frequent intervals and covering ground at a punishing gait, stopping only now and then to verify the trail marks.

It was long past midnight when he finally drew rein at the edge of the desert. Here he stopped and munched a few biscuits, which were washed down with a draught of the luke-warm water in his canteen. Then pouring some of the water into his hat he offered it to his horse, which drank it greedily in one gulp.

"Nope, they ain't enough for all of us," Quirt announced to the Bar-H horse. "We're partin' here, o'-timer." And with a slap on the rump he headed the horse back towards the Bar-H.

"Hastings is sure coverin' ground," he muttered, "an' takin' a heap of chances headin' across th' desert this-a-way. Well, where he goes, I'll follow."

Once more he mounted and rode out across the moon-lit tract of sandy waste.

Gradually the moon sank beneath the horizon and only now and then in the profound hush came to the silent rider the far-off cry of a yapping coyote. One by one the stars winked out, and for a brief interval came the false dawn, leaving the sky blacker than ever when it died out. Finally, a ghostly gray light sifted gently into the eastern sky. An orange glow played along the horizon and——

Suddenly a blazing sun came up like thunder! At once the chill of the desert night vanished and gave way to an inferno of terrific heat. The breeze changed to a stifling, choking wind that ever grew and grew, carrying sand and alkali into eyes, throat and nostrils of the lone rider plodding doggedly on.

Quirt had by now raised his bandanna to cover nose and mouth, but the sharp wind whipped through this protection with a savage force.

Far ahead on the gleaming white waste broiling under the intensity of a sky that seemed blue flame, he could see something moving slowly against the horizon. It might be Hastings and then again it might not.

Caught in a vortex of eddying sand, Quirt lowered his head to the on-driving storm, clinging close to the saddle. Gasping, choking for breath, when it had passed momentarily, he cast a quick glance across the shifting desert, which was tossing like a trackless yellow sea.

This time the figure he looked for was nearer, and before a sand cloud once more obscured his vision, Quirt could see it was a man on foot coming toward him, being blindly driven by the shifting wind-storm. Then a curtain of sand blotted out the picture and Quirt spurred his horse in

the direction he had last seen the figure.

It seemed an eternity that horse and man fought their way through the storm. At each lull Quirt peered ahead through the brassy light, but now could see nothing, save swirling sand, ahead of him.

For the fraction of a second the wind died again and the film of flying dust and alkali slowly cleared. For a brief space all was silent, then as the wind again commenced to roar he heard the report of a six-gun and felt the bandanna at his throat move.

Hastings had seen Quirt first, and worked around to his left!

The wind was whipping the desert to a maddened frenzy as Quirt slipped down from the horse and started in the direction from which the shot had come. Through the hurtling mass of sand he could make out a dim figure, then two flashes of orange flame. His .45 was half out of holster when something struck his shoulder a staggering smash. He tried to raise the gun, but his arm was numbed and wouldn't respond.

Quickly reaching for the weapon with his left hand he braced himself against the gale and pulled the trigger twice. A moment Hastings swayed gently in the wind, then dropped face downward.

Struggling at every step against the hurricane which strived to tear his legs from under him, Quirt fought his way toward the fallen figure which was laboring violently to rise.

Suddenly, without getting to his feet, Hastings braced himself on one hand and with the other raised his gun. Again it flamed forth a lurid streak!

Without hesitation Quirt pulled trigger and felt the gun leap in his hand. Hastings, sprawled like a huge frog in the soft sand, clawed a moment at his chest; his head came forward with a jerk; then he slowly sagged and rolled on his back.

Quirt staggered over and swayed on weakening legs above his adversary before his strength left him; then he sank, fighting every inch of the way, prone over Hasting's body.

It was mid-afternoon when he recovered consciousness and the storm had passed. The two men lay nearly buried in the drifting sand. Rousing, he felt for Hastings' heart, then rose and staggered drunkenly to where his horse stood patiently waiting nearby.

Somehow he managed it. With Hastings' still unconscious figure in front of him, he started towards the east, where a low-lying ridge of hazy hills offered refuge from the blazing heat of the desert.

CHAPTER XII

A WEEK later Quirt sat on the porch of the Lazy-T ranch house. It was with great difficulty that he had managed to get back, but it had been accomplished, and Hastings had been brought in. Hastings was nearly dead by the time he was taken to Kirktown, but the doctor had at last pronounced him on the road to recovery—and a long jail sentence.

At Quirt's side, bundled up comfortably in a chair and wrapped in blankets, reclined Stephen Vance. So much blood had been lost that for

a time it had looked bad for him, but at last he, too, had been pronounced out of danger. This not so much due to the doctor's daily visits as Maurine Tegland's skilful nursing. The doctor himself admitted that. This was the first time Vance had been allowed outside his room. Quirt had had no opportunity to talk to him for any length of time before.

Quirt was telling of his fight with Hastings. "Black Dan plugs me first, an' then I let him have a coupla pieces of lead. That's all they was to it," he was saying modestly. "Then I brings him in knowin' th' sheriff would want'm. I wouldn't have caught up with him so quick out in the desert, only he got turned around in the storm. Next his horse steps into a hole, or somethin', an' breaks his leg. Dan had to leave it, an' was startin' to walk th' rest of th' way, but as I says, he gets turned around and bumped plumb into me."

"I say," Vance commented, "you made a plucky fight of it, y'know. Wounded shoulder, and all." He motioned to Quirt's shoulder which was swathed in bandages.

"That don't amount to nothing," Quirt laughed. "Lost a little blood an' got th' bone nicked a mite, but it'll be all healed fine in another week or so."

The men smoked in silence for the next few minutes, then Quirt asked awkwardly, "Say, Stevie, it ain't none of my business, an' I know yuh're shootin' straight, but my curiosity's plumb overcome."

Vance smiled queerily at him and asked, "Something bothering the bally bean, old son?"

Quirt colored. "Get this straight, *amigo mio,*" he said earnestly, "I know yuh're O. K., an' if yuh don't want to tell me—why, they won't be nothin' more said. What I want to know is where *you* fit into this mix-up. One thing's certain: Yuh ain't here to buy ranch-land, like yuh give out yuh was."

Vance's head went back and he laughed heartily. "You're no end correct, old bean. I don't mind telling you now. I was sent down here by the Cattlemen's Association!"

"You *what?*" Quirt almost shouted the words, and his eyes grew wide with astonishment. "Well, I'll be damned! You a range-dick! Of all th' crazy ideas——" He broke off short and then reflected a moment before continuing, "I don't know, though. Mebbe it ain't so funny after all. Yuh sure fooled us. Then yuh ain't English, neither?"

"I'm English, right enough," Vance's sentences jerked out. "Came out here with the London Beef Association, Limited, twelve years ago. It went bankrupt. I liked the country. Stayed on. Punched cows a bit. Went to work for the Cattleman's Association as a special operative. My front, y'know — English and all that sort of thing —better than any disguise. Managed to break up a number of rustling jobs in my time." He smiled with pardonable pride. "Supposed to be Association's best man—all silly rot, of course——"

"Well, why in th' name of th' seven horned rattlers didn't yuh let us know? Tegland don't know it yet, does he?"

"No, you're the first to learn it. Y'see, Quirt, the Association had already sent one operative down here. Didn't learn anything. Every-

body spotted him at once. Then when Tegland asked for another man they sent me down. I figured I could work better if no one knew what I was doing."

Vance's eyes twinkled. "Well, old chap, I rather thought you were mixed up with the rustlers. Saw you talking quite earnestly to Grimshaw the first day you came here, y'know. Didn't quite trust you until our affair down at Botella Basin. Liked you, though, 'pon my word, I did."

"That's just the way I felt about you," Quirt admitted. "Only I thought mebbe yuh was mixed up with th' Rocking-Chair outfit. Then that day yuh beat Rowdy Gates to th' draw an' saved me bein' shot up, I knew yuh was just about th' straightest-shootin' hombre I ever met up with."

"Oh, I say, old man," Vance protested embarrassedly, "you're putting it on a bit heavy, y'know."

"I mean it," Quirt insisted. "I gotta admit, though, that I was sure up in the air when I found that broken-legged calf with the Rocking-Chair brand blotted over th' Lazy-T."

"Bothered me, too. That's why I spent so much time at the Rocking-Chair. Looking for clues. Strange coincidences — my finding two more calves like that."

Quirt laughed shortly. "Not so strange at that, Stevie. Some of Hastings' work to throw suspicion on the Rocking-Chair. Broke th' legs a-purpose so we'd be sure to find 'm. Y'see him an' Stillman had it all planned out. All they had to do was steal Lazy-T cows, hide 'm in th' Basin until they had a market, then use th' profits to *buy* what cows they needed for their own spread. That's how Stillman could allus show a bill-of-sale for his stock. 'Nother thing: None of the Bar-H punchers was in on th' deal. They were workin' their own cows an' thinkin' all th' time that Stillman and Hastings were straight. All th 'rustlin' was done by Grimshaw an' our own punchers, right here on th' Lazy-T!"

"Deuced clever of the beggars."

QUIRT nodded and then continued, "We've learned a few things about Stillman, too. He come out here from Chicago where he'd been workin' as a bank cashier. Skipped out with some of th' bank's money. Then he bought the old Diamond-S Ranch. He'd an idea he wanted to become one of these here cattle-kings. His first move was to find somebody with th' same ideas. That was Hastings and Brad Grimshaw. Them crooks pulled fine in double harness. His next move was to steal Tegland's stock. Then when Tegland wanted money for operating expenses, Stillman takes a mortgage on the Lazy-T, figgerin' if he steals enough cattle Tegland will lose th' ranch to 'm."

"Beastly rotten, I call it," came a grim ejaculation from Vance.

"That was only th' start of their plans. After they got the Lazy-T, they was goin' after th' Rocking-Chair th' same way. The Rafter-M was to follow, an' then th' rest. Say," he changed the subject abruptly, "how come yuh to come to me that night an' told me about th' rustlers usin' Botella Basin? Wa'n't yuh afraid I was one of th' rustlers, then?"

"I wasn't sure for a fact," Vance

admitted. "More than anything I wanted to see how you'd take it."

Quirt nodded his comprehension. "That was Hastings fired that shot at me through the window that night at th' Rocking-Chair," he continued the explanation. "An' it was him that hit you over th' head an' stole your note-book an' gun. Th' note-book was dropped a-purpose so's to throw suspicion on somebody else in case he was seen in the neighborhood. Not that he had any grudge against you. It was just that yuh was convenient when he was lookin' for some evidence to leave. Yep, Hastings confessed pretty free-like. I reckon him an' me has squared up at last."

Vance looked inquiringly for further information, and Quirt told him of the long enmity that had existed between them, starting with the trouble at the L-Wing.

Neither man spoke for some time and the descending sun threw out long shadows that stretched farther and farther up the porch where they sat dreaming, each with, at last, a perfect understanding of the other.

"I'll be plumb glad when Hastings' an' Stillman's trial is over, an' all th' rest," Quirt sighed at last. "Then I can be movin' on."

VANCE sat up in astonishment. "I say, old man, where are you going?"

Quirt shrugged his shoulders. "Don't exactly know. Just driftin', I reckon."

"But—how queer. No offense, old son, but y'know, I rather had an idea you were—ah—interested in Miss Maurine—if you don't mind my saying so."

"Good Lord! Stevie, I am," Quirt groaned. "But what chance have I got? Yuh're pretty interested in her yourself. Hel! Man, it's *you* she cares for. Me, I'm just a poor, damfool cow-willie tryin' to get along in th' world." His voice took on an almost savage tone as he added, "Do yuh think she'd give me a second look? *I should say not!*"

"Deuced sorry, Quirt—wish I hadn't mentioned it."

Quirt's voice softened as he groped for the other's hand. "It's all, all right, Stevie. Everything's as it should be for you."

Another long silence, then, "But, I say, do you really think she cares for me."

By this time Quirt's humor was again doing its part. He laughed softly and there was a touch of affection in the words that followed. "Why, Stevie, they ain't no two ways about it. Yuh better speak to her an' get it all settled."

"But, Quirt——"

Before he could finish the sentence a sound at the doorway caused them to turn. It was Maurine Tegland, carrying a tray.

"Hello, Quirt," she greeted him. "I didn't know you were here. Mr. Vance, here's your supper." Then as Quirt rose to go, "Don't leave, Quirt."

But he was already at the corner of the house. "Got to be movin' down to look at my hoss," he lied. "Gotta lame hoof. Anyway, I think Stevie wants to tell yuh somethin'." And without waiting for an answer he strode away into the gathering darkness, humming to himself. His soft voice floated back to them as he took up the words of the refrain:

I'm a poor lone cowboy an' I'm goin' away,

Ain't got a sweetheart an' I'm ready to stray.
Yes, I'm driftin' from th' mornin',
An' I'm driftin' from th' night,
I'm a poor lone cowboy an' . . .

"Poor chap, his heart's breaking," Vance muttered to himself, as the words died away in the distance.

"Beg pardon?" Maurine said.

"Talking to myself, that's all," Vance returned. Then he talked earnestly to Maurine for some time.

It was an hour later when Tacks Karpet came down to the bunk house to where Quirt was sitting in the gloom on the edge of a bunk, dreaming of the things that had happened, of Maurine Tegland, and of the long, lonely years that stretched before him. Tacks spoke twice before Quirt looked up.

"Yeah, what d'yuh want?" he asked.

"Vance wants to see yuh. He's sittin' on th' porch."

With a groan Quirt dragged himself up and started for the ranch house. "I suppose it's up to me to do some congratulatin'," he muttered miserably to himself, as he reached the porch.

He ascended the steps of the house to where a dim figure sat just out of range of the lamp light that streamed through the window in a cheerful flood of gold.

"Want me, Stevie?" he asked forcing a note of careless inquiry into the voice.

For a second Vance didn't answer as he sat vigorously polishing his eyeglass. Then, "I say, Quirt, old man, we made a bit of a mistake, y'know."

At the words a thrill passed through Quirt and his lips trembled. Feeling suddenly weak in the knees he asked, "What d'yuh mean?"

"Why, y'see—ah—it's *you* Miss Maurine's interested in." The words were coming hard for Vance.

Quirt leaped to Vance's side excitedly and seized him by the shoulder. "Yuh mean—yuh mean I gotta chance?" he demanded.

"Well, rather," Vance drawled. "She's inside waiting for you, now, Quirt."

But Quirt hardly waited for the last words. Like a flash he had passed through the door.

After a time Vance raised himself with an effort and squirming around peered through the window. Quirt's uninjured arm was around Maurine and his face was flushed with happiness. From Maurine's eyes shone a light that had never been there before.

FOR a second the Englishman looked in on the happy pair, and a wistful smile twisted his lips Then he settled to the seat again and reached to his coat hanging on the back of the chair. A moment his hand fumbled at a pocket, then came forth holding a flask. Unscrewing the cup-like top he poured himself a drink of the amber liquor.

"Long health and happiness for both of them, Stephen, old top," he said to himself. "You've lost the girl, but after all, it's been a ripping good party." A pause as the liquor trickled down his throat. Then a long sigh, half of regret. "Oh, well. . . ."

And he took up the dreams that Quirt had left down in the bunkhouse.

Lo, the Poor Millionaires!

A TRUE FACT ARTICLE OF THE OLD WEST

FOR nearly a century after the Indians of the Eastern United States were completely subdued the tribes of the West remained a factor and a menace. This is particularly true of the tribes inhabiting the two slopes of the Rocky Mountain ranges and the prairie country west of the Mississippi river. That they were not more successful in their wars against the white encroachers on their domain is due only to the fact that they were outnumbered so grossly.

The Red Men were not always without right on their side and they were no more cruel in many instances than their white oppressors. Kindliness or consideration in their treatment of the rightful owners of the domain was never marked among the Whites. In fact, greed was always noted in the dealings of the Whites with the Red Men. This greed had a most peculiar and retributive result in the case of the allotment of reservation to the Cherokees and Creeks natives of what is now Oklahoma and adjacent territory. It is both odd and singular that this greed acted as a boomerang making millionaires out of some of the Indians who sought nothing but a small homeland. In turn it made paupers of some of the Whites who were seeking to become millionaires at the Indians' expense.

The opening of the Cherokee strip and other Indian lands after the Indians were driven onto small reservations will remain one of the most exciting events in Western history but the real romance came later.

The politicians who were accorded the power of reserving small land allotments for the Indian tribes of the sector called into consultation the leaders of the White settlers. All hands conspired to allot the Indians only the poorest and most unproductive lands. They gave them land in Oklahoma on which it had been proven nothing digestible would grow. The reason was that the land was oil soaked. If the greedy Whites had only known.

The Indians on the reservations survived only because the Government, grudgingly enough, gave them rations of food and sustenance for their families and their small herds. It was when the White Man finally realized that there was oil in them there lands that the Indian triumphed over his oppressors. The oil lands, it happened accidentally enough, mostly belonged to the Indians. Red Men who had never known a bed save of ill-smelling oil-tinged straw began living like kings. The income of many of them mounted as high as $5,000 a day.

Guardians had to be appointed for the millionaire Indians to prevent them from drinking and dissipating themselves to death. These guardians in many instances deliberately conspired to get the oil wealth away from the Indians, but the Government stepped in in the more flagrant cases and called a halt.

The country now is full of Indians who live in palaces rather than tepees, who live in luxury and who enjoy all the advantages of travel and higher education.

Because of the wealth of the Indians there has been considerable intermarriage with whites and after a few generations it is possible the greed of the Whites will again bear fruit and the blood as well as the great fortunes of the millionaire Indians will be completely absorbed.

Mathewson stood up, his shotgun balanced casually in the crook of his arm. "Howdy boys," he said.

RETURN OF THE

CHAPTER 1

THE girl had heard the rider minutes before his horse's head appeared around the jutting angle in the trail; heard and speculated idly as to his identity.

She gasped in astonishment as the horse shyed violently at sight of her, sitting on a rock in the shade of a cottonwood. This was a fine state of affairs, she thought, when a seated girl could so visibly frighten a Western cowpony. And even

Range war, range ruin, range lust! It was the old story, the cruel story of the west, when the law was young and powerless. . . . Backed by bush-whack guns the renegade legions had wiped out the honest, hard-working ranchers and had taken their spreads for themselves. . . . Rusty Barnes knew this story, knew it only too well, for Rusty's father had been one of the first to fight the range-hogs, and one of the last to fall before their guns!

though she had frightened a man's horse, that was no reason for his ungentlemanly actions.

Even as the horse stood in what seemed to her a precarious balance on dancing hind legs, the rider's hand had brushed his hip in a swift movement and a gun crashed in his hand, its bullet chipping the rock so near where she sat that she felt the wind of its passing on her bare arm.

She sprang up, deafened by the echoes of the shot, frightened a little, startled; but all other emotions giving way before the flood of indignation that grew as she waited while he brought his mount down on four feet at last and faced her.

"I suppose that was your cowboy idea of a joke," she blazed at him "Perhaps you're going to try and make me dance while you shoot at my feet!"

Words failed her, but her eyes were still eloquent.

"Rusty" Barnes swung down from his saddle, his eyes leaving hers to travel gravely over her from the crown of her shingled head to the tips of her boots. Eastern girl; too white to belong here in the land of the sun. Black hair, cut boy fashion, making her head a study in classic curves. Her eyes would be brown, he guessed, when they stopped being black with anger. He flipped the cylinder of his gun.

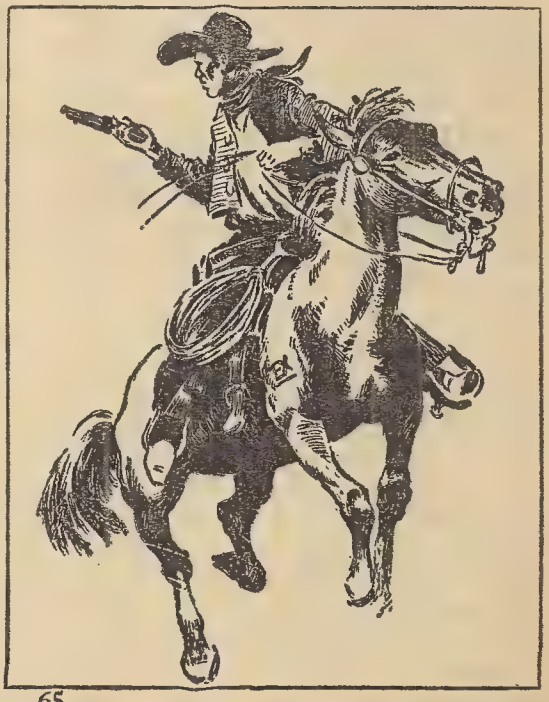
"No, Miss. I wasn't jokin' any at all." The girl watched him slip a fresh cartridge into the emptied chamber. The gun slid back into

GUN-CUB

by

JAMES ROURKE

AN ACTION PACKED NOVEL OF A KID WHO FOUGHT FOR THE HONOR OF HIS LONG DEAD FATHER!



its holster and the hand that had held it lifted to drag the dusty Stetson from a rumpled head. "I was plumb serious. And I reckon the little stranger here was serious, too. He had an ugly look in his eye, seemed to me."

He walked forward to the rock where she had been seated and as he spoke his right foot raked something from behind it—a something that changed the anger in the girl's eyes to a look of horrified understanding.

The bullet that had missed her so narrowly had smashed the pointed head of a rattlesnake, and its body curled now beside the stranger's boot, its dark diamond mottlings blending to deathly pallor where the under body lay exposed.

"He was all set when I saw him and I had to shoot too quick to warn you. It's dog days, you know, and they don't remember to rattle sometimes. Get plumb vicious, seems like— I'm right sorry to frighten you, Miss."

"Oh! I didn't know—! I thought —oh, please, I'm sorry—"

"Sure, I know. It was startlin', me shootin' plumb at you like that, and us not even introduced, and all!" He paused, glancing sidewise at her. Still shocked with the knowledge of the danger that had crawled so near her, she missed his opening and he continued soothingly. "I've been shot at some myself," he said. "Always makes me sort o' peevish, too, 'specially if the shooter's a stranger to me. My name's John Barnes, speakin' of strangers, Miss. Some folks call me Jack; and some get right familiar and call me Rusty. I reckon I got it comin' to me, though." He rumpled his dark hair significantly.

"I'm really awlfully grateful, Mister—Mister Barnes. Lots more so than I sounded at first, I'm afraid. And—my name is Jacqueline Miller. Folks call me Jack, too; but not Rusty," she smiled at him.

The click of a horse's hoofs on rocks came to them, followed by the broken rhythm of other steps. One—two—three horses. Jacquline counted them as each in turn struck the sounding rock floor of the narrow cut. She turned toward Rusty Barnes inquiringly. "Someone with you?" she asked.

His pose answered her even before the quick jerk of his head signaled negation. He stood beside his black horse, screened almost completely from the direction of the approaching horsemen, eyes fixed upon the trail where it disappeared around the ledge, his right hand resting upon the curved butt of the gun at his hip. Jacqueline sensed the strain of his waiting by the hard line at his jaw. What could he fear of strange riders? Or perhaps it was a pursuing enemy he feared; perhaps the law? She found an almost personal disappointment in the thought. She liked his face; his clear, clean eyes.

The lead horse appeared suddenly around the ledge, snorted explosively at sight of them, came slowly nearer, followed by two other mounted men. So it was not pursuit the man feared; these were local ranchers. Jacqueline knew them—too well.

"Evenin', Miss Miller." The leader doffed his hat in an elaborate gesture. "Heard a gunshot over this way a minute ago. You—havin' trouble, or just practicin'?" He glanced again at Barnes. "Oh—! Rusty Barnes, by gosh! I didn't

recognize yuh, first off." The girl caught a harsher note in the man's voice, hardly evidenced in his words.

"No, Mr. Snyder, no trouble. Mr. Barnes killed a snake just now." She shuddered involuntarily. "It was very thoughtful of you to ride in, though. More considerate than I would have expected of you." Rusty glanced at her, surprised by the crisp coolness of her tone.

"Still rescuin' damsels in distress, eh, Barnes?" Snyder's smile was not friendly and Jacqueline caught a plainly hostile sneer on the face of one of his two companions. The by-play puzzled her. "Well, judgin' by th' sidewinder yonder, you're just as gun-handy as ever." Snyder's venom was thinly veiled now.

"I can kill a snake now and then, Snyder. 'Specially when he's aimin' to strike a girl." Rusty cliped his words closely, and his smile, too, was a trifle unreal. Jack saw a slow flush mount in Snyder's face. The hatred in his eyes was not yet concealed when he turned again to her.

"We come by the Circle W, Miss, lookin' for yer brother. He wasn't home, so you might tell him I'll send some boys over Monday fer my steers."

"I didn't know there were any JC steers at the Circle W." Jacqueline looked up inquiringly.

"Oh, yes." Snyder chuckled shortly. "Your brother ain't so good playin' poker, Miss. He give me a bill o' sale fer a hundred head last night fer what he owed me." Jacqueline's dismay restored his good humor and he spoke again to Rusty. "See yuh in town, I reckon, Rusty? Aimin' to stay in these parts awhile?"

"Snyder, when I start callin' you 'Squint,' you can take it as leave to name me Rusty. Till then, my friends will be the only ones callin' me pet names! See?"

One of the men behind Snyder moved sharply, and Jack noticed the sudden, tightening of Rusty's hand on the gun butt. "I'm aimin' to be a permanent fixture hereabouts, too. You'll see me in town, I reckon, if you're lookin'."

Snyder laughed a bit too loudly for casualness. "So long, then. See y' later! G'day, Miss Jack. Come on, boys."

Rusty stood silent until they were out of sight again on the crooked trail. He turned then, smiling again, to Jacqueline. "Friends of yours?" he asked.

"No! Nor of yours, I gather."

"No." Rusty dropped his eyes before hers and regarded his boots intently. "It's an old war between Snyder and me. I reckon he was some surprised seein' me here. Last time we met he saw me through smoke. I—shot him for striking a greaser girl." Jacqueline recalled Snyder's flush at mention of snakes! "She was my mother's house girl, 'fore Snyder took our ranch. I was a kid then. Snyder owned the law around here, so—I left. When I heard Mathewson was sheriff, I headed back home. Snyder can't run *him!* I'm bettin' on that!"

"I hate that man—Snyder!" Jacqueline's voice broke huskily with the emotion that filled it.

"Too bad your brother don't feel the same way! His poker playin' with Snyder is apt to be expensive."

"Oh, Carl. Carl is my half-brother. We're on the Circle W. You may have known my uncle, Stephen Ferris? The ranch came

to me when he died. He specified that Carl should manage it for me until I—married. He thought responsibility and his beloved West would make a man of Carl. It hasn't. His gambling has cost us more than we can possibly afford, and he won't stop. I've begged him. but Snyder flaters him and leads him on. I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"I want to know, Miss!" Rusty stepped toward her impulsively. "If it'll make you feel more like tellin' me, I'm back here to square my own accounts with Snyder! He's takin' your ranch, with cards. He took mine—Dad's, that is—with a brandin' iron! Dad's brand was the Lucky 'Leven: just two bars like an eleven. Snyder registered the JC. His herds grew as fast as he could burn curves on our straight lines! I can't prove that. Can't prove he killed my dad, either! But I know it! I heard him laugh in the darkness after the shot—like he laughed just now! So we're even on the matter of Snyder. We can be friends on that, can't we, Miss Jack?" He extended his hand suddenly, and smiled so boyishly that Jacqueline fell in with his mood and took it, smiling back at him.

"Surely you have earned my friendship." She glanced down to where the snake lay twisted in the dust.

"Oh! Forget it. Only just be careful, sittin' around in the open durin' dog days. A sheddin' sidewinder is right bad company. I'll catch your horse for you. It's an hour 'fore sundown, so you'll have daylight home. I'm headed for town."

He found the horse further down the cut and led him back to her. She swung into the saddle and he pulled the big black alongside. "Maybe you'd be interested in knowin', Miss Jack, I've been playin' poker for five years, so's to beat Snyder! That's one way I'll get him. And —I can shoot his fingers off while he's goin' for his gun—which is another."

CHAPTER II

SINCE the days of its birth as a mushroom mining town, when all the Southwest went silver-mad, Lodestone had been the stage of the fiercest dramas, the center of wildest action. Added to its quota of cattlemen, it held a shifting but fairly constant population of mining folk who dug sustenance, at least, from the hills in which they had hoped to find wealth. And mingling with these, Lodestone entertained the wandering gentry whose migrations followed the changing line of the frontier; men who reaped where they had not sewn, with cards or guns.

Because of its permanence, based largely then upon its mining resources, it was inevitable that there should gradually come to Lodestone a scattering of earnest, purposeful home builders—and they had come. Lodestone gorged awhile upon its diet of "a man each day for breakfast," and scorned the puny efforts of law and order against its chaos. But these men stayed on, some of them; built stores alongside roaring saloons; established ranches upon the plains beyond the hills.

The Lucky 'Leven had been one of the first of the brands so established. Jesse Barnes had won, by right of his indomitable strength and courage, a niche of his own in the Southwest. He gathered herds

about him and kept aloof from Lodestone's bickerings and became a cattle baron with a wide dominion.

He was a strong man and a feared one; and so he was struck down from the dark. First by a bullet from ambush that laid him low and left only a mockery of his strength. Then the vultures swooped. Lucky 'Leven herds became the prey of the thieving gangs that fattened on Lodestone's borders and not even the fighting will of the wounded old baron could meet the onslaught. But while he lived he was feared. Months after the first shot from the dark that had felled him, another ended his battle forever. He hobbled to the door of his house one night in answer to a hail from without—swung the door wide, and fell in its lighted frame, the crash of forty-fives his requiem.

Inside the house a mother wrenched a Winchester from the hands of a maddened, crying boy. "Stop, John! You're all I've got, now. They'll kill you, too, if you fire at them." Rusty Barnes was then fourteen years of age.

Three years later, beaten by the unequal struggle against frontier odds, Rusty's mother passed away. The Lucky 'Leven was mortgaged. "Squint" Snyder, despite the accusations that his gun had shared in the killing of the elder Barnes, had posed as the magnanimous benefactor by loans to the desperate widow—loans on excellent security. And Rusty Barnes, heir to his father's fighting will, inherited, too, his mother's patience. He fed both heritages with a passion for that lusty pet of the West, the Colt Frontier Model .45. At seventeen he was uncannily fast on the draw—shot with deadly accuracy.

The event of Snyder's taking possession of the old Lucky 'Leven was Rusty's first use of a human target. Pedro and his wife and daughter, who had served the old cattle baron and later remained to serve his widow, were moving, now that their service was ended. Snyder, vociferously in command of all the proceedings, had protested against the removal of a shawl worn upon the shoulders of the daughter, Carmencita.

"It's hers," Rusty had then interfered truculently. "Mother gave it to her. Let her alone!"

"Shut up, you red-headed cub!"

Snyder's quirt made a swishing slash across the shawled shoulders. Rusty's gun barked and Snyder reeled back, his quirt falling from his hand, his right shoulder smashed by the heavy slug.

"Kill him!" he shrieked.

Holding the smoking gun hip-low and menacing, Rusty spoke softly: "Go on! Shoot! But I'll take your boss with me! Tell 'em to shoot, Snyder! Take a chance. I might miss!"

Snyder refused to take that chance, and Rusty rode with the migrating Mexicans.

In Mexico City Pedro's son had given them haven. Rusty, he accepted as a brother and young master. And it was at his suggestion, and coached at his skiled hands, that Rusty became apprentice at the tables of the gaming house he ran at a good profit.

"Learn the cards, senor. Make them your friends. They will humble your enemy and restore your lands. When you have stripped him of goods—Dios! The cards, I will teach you. The gun—you *know!*"

The boy had good hands. Slender, facile fingers that fell with equal cunning to swift-moving pasteboards or curved gun butt. He had, too, the steel nerves and the will to sit coldly unperturbed while luck ran its tide to ebb and flow—to master both cards and men under steady, impersonal eyes. Young Pedro delighted in him.

Five years! Gamblers are born, not made; and Rusty lacked one thing. He had not the passion for chance that is a tireless flame in some men's souls. He became a marvelously efficient instrument, nothing more. It was a means, not an end. So that, when five years had passed and word came of the beginning of a new era in Lodestone—a struggle of law and order against gang rule—Rusty returned to take his part in an upheaval that promised to shake the country. Mathewson was sheriff by state appointment. Mathewson was a man, and a fighter. He was too big to be "owned" by any man or group of men.

Arrived now among familiar scenes, a new phase was entered into the coming developments—a girl in short riding skirt and pongee shirt, tiny feet in slender boots, black hair and eyes of brown. Snyder was warring once more now against women. And what a woman!

CHAPTER III

ON THE lip of the broad mesa overlooking Lodestone, Rusty pulled the black to a halt. The trail, well worn and broad, wound in easy stages down the long slope to where the town lay sprawled like a tumble of spilled blocks on the prairie floor. Its only claim to geometrical arrangement was in the one broad street which divided it roughly in half. This street was walled with the buildings in which Lodestone traded, and danced, and gambled, and drank—lived and died. Back of these on either side were less pretentious buildings, rudely constructed dwelling that ranged from the neatly boarded homes of property owners to the ramshackle huts of careless miners. In area, the place was city size.

He entered the town from the north and rode slowly down the main street. Halfway of its length, where a rudely painted board bore the words, "Cattlemen's Hotel," he left the black horse at the hitching-rack and went inside to establish a residence.

It was well after dark when Rusty Barnes paused before one of the neater of Lodestone's residences and compared it mentally with the description his directions had included.

"Mathewson? He lives in the fourth house back o' Pete's Place. Got a porch in front. You can't miss it."

The two hours since his arrival at the Cattlemen's Hotel had witnessed various changes in Rusty's appearance. The big Stetson had shed its coating of gray alkali dust and sat jauntily over deep auburn hair that still bore the sheen of brush and water. The beard had been cleanly shaved away and Rusty was himself again.

His knock was answered by footsteps inside and the door swung open to reveal a middle-aged woman in housewifely garb.

"I want to see Dan, Mrs. Mathewson. I reckon you don't remember me—"

"Rusty Barnes, by all that's holy! Come right in here this minute! Dan, come here! Boy, you haven't changed a bit since you left five years ago!"

"Shucks, now, Mrs. Mathewson; I reckon I've grown some," Rusty defended his manhood. "Hello, Dan!"

Mathewson swung a mighty hand to Rusty in greeting. "Howdy, lad! I'm plumb glad t' see you, sure. Where you been all this time?"

Dan Mathewson was another of the rugged pioneer breed of which the elder Barnes had been a part. Massive, square, fearless, his big voice was a key to the man himself.

"Sure, he's grown, Ma! Lord, look at him! Six feet if he's an inch, and near as broad as me! Where you been and whatcha been doin'?"

It was good to be welcomed. Rusty relaxed into the warm friendliness of it and told in part the story of the past years. But his visit was not without aim and he guided the conversation finally to its point.

"—and so, Dan, I got myself made a United States deputy. Still some friends of Dad's over at the capital, and they fixed it for me. I'm here to get Snyder."

"Hm-m! I reckoned as much. Well—he's still here!"

"Yeah. I've seen him." Rusty recounted the scene on the trail. "You know the girl, Dan?"

"Sure! Niece of old Steve Ferris', inherited the Circle W from him. Half-brother, Carl Wilson, is supposed to be managin' it for her. Hell of a manager he is! She's a regular girl, that Miss Jack. Snyder's got intentions towards her, I hear—her and her ranch."

"She don't cotton to him none."

"No. But Snyder won't let that stop him. He's got things pretty much his own way, Rusty." Mathewson frowned, speaking thoughtfully. "You see, folks're afraid to buck him. He's protectin' himself with a lot of gunmen who come up from the Border. Nobody hankers after trouble with him. He's aimin' to get th' Circle W, now that old Ferris is gone. He wants to get Tincup Springs. That's the surest water in this county, you know. But he's clever. Knows that fightin' Miss Jack openly would make him a heap unpopular, so he's gettin' her through her brother."

"I guessed that from what happened today," Rusty said.

"'Course he knows I'm against him," Mathewson went on, "but he ain't hankerin' to down me unless it's plumb needful. Knows it would cause trouble from outside."

"Well, I'm fightin' him, too, Dan." Rusty stood up. " greaser was killed in Pedro's place awhile back—one of Snyder's old raiders. He talked before he cashed in. Snyder killed my dad, Dan. I always said so. This greaser was with him that night. There was another man —Malone. But Snyder shot him."

"I'm surprised you didn't bore him when you met him today, knowin' that." Mathewson's face was stormily dark. Jesse Barnes had been his friend.

"I've got it all figured out, Dan —my own way. I'm aimin' to get back what he stole from Dad and from Mother first. And—I'm here as an officer, too. I want to get the goods on Snyder and his gang. There'll be time enough for fireworks then."

"If I can help, lad—"

"If you can help, Dan, I'll know where to find you!"

CHAPTER IV

AT A TABLE opposite the bar in the Lone Star, Lodestone's most prosperous saloon and shrine of the Goddess of Chance, Snyder sat with the two men who had been his companions in the canyon.

"This Barnes kid comin' back may mean trouble. His dad was trick with Mathewson, an' th' kid always said I killed his old man." Snyder's voice was too low to reach beyond the ears of his friends.

"Did yuh kill him, Squint?"

"What's it to you, Nat? Anyway, Barnes don't love me, and he's a fire-eatin' kid—fast as hell with a gun."

Nat Merritt grinned crookedly. "That don't make him bullet-proof, I reckon."

Snyder nodded. "We may have to down him. Malone'll be back soon and he ought to be able to do it in a square fight, and no questions asked."

The third man leaned across the table towards Snyder. "There's Wilson," he whispered. "You gamblin' tonight?"

"Sure!" Snyder turned and called cordially to the youth at the bar. "Come on over, Carl! Give yuh a chance to get even, if you like."

Carl Wilson was a slender, dark young man, his youth accentuated by the marks of dissipation that had left his skin yellowed with a pallor that contrasted strongly with his black hair and eyes. He dropped into a chair beside Snyder.

Rusty Barnes had cast inquiring glances into each saloon he passed in his aimless saunter. As he paused in the doorway of the Lone Star, his eyes found the group at the table, and hardened. He entered and crossed to the bar.

"You all need another hand over there, don't you, Snyder?" he called. "My dinero's good, and cravin' action."

Snyder whirled, startled; relaxed again as he noted the boy's careless, slouching posture leaning back against the bar. "Sure. Five makes a faster game. Set in." He exchanged glances with his companions. What was back of this sudden friendliness?

The game settled into its groove. Now and then a hand more potent than the rest caused a brief flurry of betting. Rusty played silently, smiling. Wilson, losing, was morose and bitter. Snyder grew bitingly sarcastic. Rusty raised a pot—lost—bought a new stack of chips, playing from a fat roll of yellowbacks. Beneath lowered brows he caught furtive glances passed between Snyder and his men. The game livened up. It was stud with white chips a dollar and no limit. A little crowd of spectators collected around the table.

Midnight. Rusty dealing, faced an Ace and bet. His next card was a Jack. Snyder, backing a King-seven, raised the second bet. Wilson dropped out. Rusty called. Snyder's next was a second seven. He bet, and Rusty raised ten blues from behind his Ace, Jack, ten. Snyder peeked again at his hole card. It was another King. Two pairs, Kings up; and Rusty seemed to be backing Aces. He re-raised—and Rusty promptly doubled the raise. "I'm huntin' a Queen," he remarked.

"And I'm always lucky with the ladies."

Snyder's confederates had had enough. They dropped out, and Snyder called. Rusty held the deck in one hand, grinned at Snyder: "You and me, Snyder!" Snyder nodded. Rusty flipped a card—a six. "Now—' he was still grinning at Snyder, "my Queen!" His card slid down, turning: the Queen of Clubs.

Snyder's estimate of Aces was hastily revised. Ace, Queen, Jack, ten; a King in the hole would fill the straight. But he himself held two pairs and one of them was Kings. He bet. Rusty raised, hesitantly. Reassured, Snyder re-raised. Rusty grinned at him. "Now you've gone and done it, Snyder! Stepped right into it!" He produced the roll of bills once more. "You never should have raised back like that. I'm goin' to boost it just —five hundred!"

"So-o! You *got* your straight!"

"Nope! I'm bluffin'! Five hundred dollars' worth!" Rusty grinned.

Slowly, his lips drawn in a thin line, Snyder leaned back in his chair. The possibilities of a straight seemed very good, indeed, now; better, as vouched for by five crisp, new bills. He fingered his chips, reached out slowly—faced his cards. "Two pair is beat, Rusty. You win."

"Thanks." Rusty flipped his hole card into view. "I never lie, you see! I was bluffin'!" Snyder stared down at the cards: Ace, Queen, Jack, ten—and the deuce of diamonds!

A roar of laughter greeted Snyder's chagrin. It had been a royal farce. Snyder, the gambler, hoaxed by a grinning red-headed boy!

Snyder's face lowered blackly for a moment and then he forced a smile. "You might 'a' had 'em, at that. Anyhow, I quit plungin' on two pairs 'fore you was born, fella! The game's young."

"Nope. Game's over! I'm quittin' while my average is high. You'll get your revenge, though—later. I'm aimin' to play poker with you once more, Mr. Snyder!" The circle around the table fell silent as an edge came into Rusty's voice. "And *don't forget about my name!* You ain't a friend o' mine, Snyder!"

Snyder stood up, his face working. "Damn yuh, Barnes, you think you're damned clever, don't yuh? I notice you're clever as hell with a deck o' cards, sure! I wonder what your hole card would a' been if I had called?"

Rusty smiled, impudently. "You never can tell, can you, Snyder? 'Cause it takes guts to call—and that's one thing you ain't got! You got another chance to call a bluff, right now, Snyder!"

The crowd tensed, expectantly. Snyder's jaw set; his henchmen, Nat Merritt and Bill North, waited his move. Slowly, Synder relaxed again—forced a smile. "I'll save yuh for another time, hombre. This time yer bluff is good."

"*This* time I wasn't bluffin', Snyder!" Rusty turned on his heel, elbowed through the crowd, and was gone.

CHAPTER V

ON THE top rail of a Circle W corral, where a corner post reared its head to form a support, Jacqueline Miller sat dreamily watching a coneshaped column of dust that crept almost impercep-

tibly toward her along the trail from Lodestone.

It was Monday. Sometime today Snyder would come for his cattle. A hundred head, lost over the gaming table, now when every yearling counted in their struggle. Carl was impossible. To be sure, his managership of the Circle W was from a status of partnership. His pay was a share in the ranch profits. But those profits had not been large, and he was overdrawn.

Their fund of cash was diminished to a negligible minimum by his constant inroads and now he was throwing away their only source of increase. Saturday would be payday. Six men to draw a month's salary each; more than her bank balance showed. The men were away now, gathering a few steers to be sold hastily on a low market. She wondered if they knew that they were driving their pay checks on the hoof! A fly came to rest upon her boot and she flicked at it irritably with her quirt.

Carl had not been home. Her little fling of resentment against his injustice had been her decision to leave Snyder's payment altogether in his hands. She was alone; no one to send out to gather more cattle; and she refused to be her own messenger on such an errand. Carl might at least return to attend to the payment. No doubt this was he, riding beneath the dust cloud yonder. It was a single horseman, and Snyder, when he came, would bring men to drive the cattle.

She turned as the rider drew opposite the turn that led into the Circle W. He was coming in. Horse and rider appeared from out the dust, and Jacqueline's lips tightened into a frown. It was Snyder, mounted on the ugly, buckskin stallion he called Diablo.

"Hullo, Miss Jack." Snyder pulled the big horse closer to the corral. "Didn't see yuh fer a minute, settin' there so quiet."

"Good morning, Mr. Snyder. You came for your cattle, I suppose?"

"Well, now, I thought I'd drop by, like I said. But, knowin' that Carl's still in town, I really didn't figger on gettin' the steers. It ain't important, anyway. Any time will suit me. I ain't unreasonable, Miss Jack."

"I suppose you know that my brother has no right to sell my cattle? That unless I choose to honor his action, your bill of sale is worthless?"

"Well, I did think o' that," Snyder smiled. "But yuh wouldn't double-cross your own brother like that. Anyway, Carl signed your name to th' bill o' sale—which if it ain't met is forgery, or gettin' money under false pretenses, or somethin' like that. 'Course I ain't figgerin' on makin' you no trouble, Miss Jack."

"No, of course not, Mr. Snyder!" Jacks' sarcasm was biting. "Well, the bill of sale will be honored. You needn't worry. But—I've been alone, and the cattle will have to be rounded up. Carl will attend to it, I suppose when he returns."

"Sure. That's all right," Snyder pulled closer to the fence. His smile was leering now. "There's other ways o' settlin' this little debt o' mine. Ways I'd like better. I ain't needin' Circle W steers."

Jack's boots came to rest on a lower rail of the fence and she stood up, holding the post with her left hand as support. Neither had noticed the approach of a man on a black

horse who had ridden out of the coulee to the south and come silently across the intervening space of turf to a point on the opposite side of the corral and shielded from view by a corner of a barn. He had dismounted now, listening.

"Yonder is the trail, Mr. Snyder. Whatever settlement you care to make can be made with my brother. You'd better go!"

Snyder leaned towards her. "I'd rather settle with you, little girl," he chuckled. "That's why I come today. I'm crazy about yuh, Jack! I want yuh!" His arm shot out, caught at her wrist. She flung up the braided quirt she carried, brought it down in a stinging slash across his face. The buckskin lunged under him and was jerked down. Snyder came close again, his face livid except for the white line where the lash had bitten. "Damn yuh, I meant to ask yuh to marry me! I was that big a fool! Now—" He swung the fighting stallion closer, caught the punishing quirt in a steel grip and flung it aside. His left arm reached out to cluth the girl.

A gun boomed nearby and the buckskin reared again. Snyder's left hand jerked and—he screamed.

Jack whirled and stared at Rusty Barnes as he leaned easily against the fence, a smoking gun held loosely in his right hand. Snyder gazed, sickened, at his hand, two fingers shattered by the heavy slug.

"If you wrap it up tight with your bandanna it won't bleed too much for you to get to town. I'd start right away, though." Rusty's suggestion was amiably voiced. Snyder sat still, silent and dazed. Rusty straightened, stepped forward swiftly. "Slope, coyote!" His words had a vicious sharpness now. "That's twice I've nicked you. Next time I'll be aimin' dead center—and I won't miss!"

Snyder found his voice in a rush of curses. Rusty halted him saying, "Your language is plumb indecent, Mister. There's a lady present. Fan it, Snyder! Pronto!"

The buckskin leaped as Snyder drove the spurs in. "I'll kill yuh for this, Barnes!"

Rusty bowed stiffly. "At your service, Snyder!" He watched until the buckskin and his rider were out of gunshot, then turned to the girl.

"I always come shootin', seems like," he smiled up at her. "You seem to have a fatal attraction for rattlesnakes! Can I help?" He lifted his arms to her—swung her gently to the ground. "Why—why, you're cryin'! You poor kid."

She swayed towards him—found his arms immensely comforting and buried her face in the silken scarf that draped his shoulder, sobbing quietly as trained nerves gave way. He held her gently, touching her hair with soothing fingers. "There, kid; it's all right."

She straightened at last, smiling shamefacedly as she dabbed at wet eyes with a tiny handkerchief. "That was foolish!" Rusty wondered if tears were really wasted when they left such beautiful eyes. "I want to thank you again. It's twice you've rescued me."

He smiled and said softly, "I really don't mind rescuin' you, Miss Jack.

"I'm afraid you've made a dangerous enemy, this time."

"He was already that. And anyway, I wouldn't worry. I'm right

proud of my enemies. I'm hopin' I've made a friend, too."

Jack smiled back at him. Mimicking his own tone mischieviously: "She was already that. And anyway, I wouldn't worry."

"I'm right proud of my friends, too," he finished for her. They laughed together and she caught his hand in gay camaraderie. "Come on up to the house then and have luncheon with me. I've a Jap cook whose dishes are strange but delicious! And it's cool on the veranda."

It was a charming hour, Rusty found. Food, and the cool of a breeze across the broad, shaded porch; Jacqueline serving, talking, smiling.

"I've remembered that maybe you had a reason for coming," she said at last. "Or was it just providential that you happened by just when I needed you?"

Just when she needed him. Rusty's heart skipped a beat and raced to catch up. "I just came to see you, Miss Jack. That is," Rusty found it a bit hard to meet her eyes now, "I remembered Snyder sayin' he'd be comin' after his cattle today. And, seein' as I won more than them steers are worth off Snyder last night, I thought—well, I wanted to see you anyway, and I thought you might be willin' to let me—sort of—settle with Snyder with his own money. But he was so plumb ornery I got all riled up and forgot to mention it to him."

"You *are* a friend, aren't you, Rusty? But—I couldn't let you do it."

"I was afraid you'd feel like that," he mourned. "And this money burnin' my pockets, too!" He stood up, turning his hat nervously in his hands. "You said I happened along just when you needed me, Miss Jack. I'm mighty glad I was on time." Something in her eyes drove the embarrassment from his and he caught her hands in a boyish gesture. "I meant what I said about that Don Juan fellow," he said, quickly. "One girl is all I want! And I hope you'll he needin' me often!"

She watched him swing into the saddle and turn to whirl his hat high in farewell—raised her hand quickly in answer and watched until the black horse and his rider dwindled to disappear in a slow-moving cloud of dust. "I hope you'll be needin' me often." She smiled a bit wistfully as the words repeated themselves in her mind. "I—wonder."

And Rusty, riding jauntily toward Lodestone, found many things for which to be thankful. He whistled a gay tune.

"She needed us, she said, Smokey!" he gloated. "Shucks, now; can you imagine that? Us bein' needed, and by a girl like that! I reckon she did, too. That Snyder's a mean hombre to women. Always was— And she cried with her head on my shoulder, Smokey!" He twisted the scarf about and regarded its texture minutely. "Sure did! Gosh!" And Smokey cocked an attentive ear backward knowingly as his rider bust into song:

"Oh-h-h, my feet in the stirrups
and my hand on the horn,
I'm the luckiest cowpuncher ever
was born."

CHAPTER VI

THE Mexican who had died in Pedro's gaming house below the Border had told much more

of Snyder's history than had to do with the killing of Jesse Barnes.

Snyder was chief of a gang that operated on both sides of the Border. Above the northern banks of the river they gathered great herds —contributions from many brands, skillfully collected by scattered rustlers, and swept them across into Mexico. Often, returning north, they carried tiny, precious packets of drugs, each one destined to add its potent share to the score of human wretchedness.

The gangs were versatile. Snyder himself was the brain. Malone, North, Merritt—they were simply guns in Snyder's hands; proxies for the physical courage he lacked. And yet more than the head must be removed. Even with Snyder gone, Malone and North and Merritt might carry on. And such were Rusty Barnes' instructions from the source of his commission as a special officer: "Get Snyder. But get the others, too!"

Three were here in Lodestone. Malone was lacking, and when he came—Rusty's jaw set and his eyes lost their boyish softness. They could be hard, those eyes, despite their blue depths.

Malone was already arrived. Rusty learned as much from Mathewson almost as soon as he reached Lodestone. The burly sheriff burst into his room, agog with the news.

"His comin' up means action, Rusty. There's carrion somewhere when the vultures gather!"

"It means more action than Snyder's plannin', maybe. If I can get 'em together I'm figurin' to make a clean sweep."

"You can't do it alone, boy! Malone's a gunman and he's fast!"

Mathewson blinked down the yawning muzzle of the forty-five that had appeared as by magic in Rusty's hand. "He'll *have* to be fast, Dan! I ain't packin' this cannon for pleasure, exactly."

"Lord!" Mathewson rubbed his jaw speculatively. "I reckon you're right! I've seen some gunplay, and you got a plenty slick hand. But there's Merritt and North to account for. Merritt's a snake. He'd rather bore yuh at long range from behind somethin'—but he will fight. And North is bad, same as Malone only not so fast. You'll need help, lad."

Briefly, Rusty recited the story of the day's event. "If Snyder's in town and has Malone backin' him, he may crave my scalp. I promised to offer him revenge for the beatin' he got last night at poker. He might be countin' on that. S'pose you spend the evenin' in the Lone Star."

"That's Snyder's own place, you know."

"Yeah, I know. All the better."

Rusty left his room soon after dark. Once again he was immaculate in newly acquired cleanliness, a new scarf adding to the lesser changes. For some reason the discarded scarf, carefully dusted and folded, was buttoned inside the pocket of his shirt.

Lodestone's main street was alive with life. Cattlemen, miners, men of no calling, mingled along the street and in its pleasure houses. Girls from the dance halls called gayly as they clung alongside striding men. Blazing doorways emitted sounds of revelry; music, voices, clatter of chips. Catlike, Lodestone had awakened to live between its suns.

The Lone Star was well filled. Rusty paused outside to search the

room, Mathewson, his great bulk looming above the crowd, stood at the foot of the bar. Near him, his back to the door, Snyder was drinking with a man Rusty recognized instantly. They had met before; it was Malone. Slender, small, hawk-faced, the man reminded Rusty of a spider, deadly, silent, creeping.

As the two men turned to the bar, Rusty entered and crossed the room to stand behind Snyder. Malone caught his reflection in the bar glass and turned swiftly. Snyder's left hand hung in a looped sling on his chest.

"Howdy, Malone."

"Howdy, Barnes."

Snyder whirled to face Rusty. "Good evenin', Snyder. I'm wonderin' if you still crave action on the coin I won from you last night. You can still play poker, I reckon—even with a clipped wing."

The silence was deadly. Snyder's face was dark with anger. An even break was not what he hoped for, and the offer of the cards swayed him. "All right. Only this'll be a man-sized game, Barnes! I want real action!"

"You can get it!" Rusty clipped his words short. "Three of us, eh? And—the sky's the limit."

From the beginning the game was intense. Stakes were high, and the three men bet relentlessly, forcing pots to breath-taking size. The circle of watchers deepened about the table. Poker like that was too good to miss.

Rusty got the first break of the evening: a low straight against Snyder's threes. The pot was pushed up and up, Snyder dealing awkwardly, and honestly, perforce, with one hand. A little later, Snyder pulled down a strong pot on Malone's deal. The little man would bear watching.

Rusty glanced up once to meet Mathewson's eye. The sheriff stood just back of Snyder, intent upon the game. Another pot mounted dizzily and fell to Barnes. And then another. Snyder was losing heavily now.

A pair of Queens fell to Snyder on Rusty's deal, and he drowned them, forcing the betting. At the fourth card, Snyder's Queens were high against Rusty's nine high and all spades in sight. Malone was out. Snyder bet his remaining chips.

"*And* five hundred, Snyder. I'm backin' my luck." Rusty laid the bills upon the little mountain of chips.

"Damn yuh, I call! And I'll cut those cards!" Snyder flung his money upon the table and reached for the deck. He cut it deeply—replaced the cut.

Rusty grinned. His eyes held Snyder's as he recovered the deck. "You flatter me, Snyder! And just for that—I'll deal with one hand like you're havin' to do! That'll make it fair."

Deliberately, he dropped a card to Snyder. The Queens were not helped. With equal slowness he slid the top card from the deck, turned it—the Ace of Diamonds.

"That busts your flush!" Snyder was reaching for the pot.

"*Bet!*" Rusty's voice cracked in the silence like a whip.

"Hell!" Snyder sneered. "Still in?"

"Bet your Queens!"

"Check 'em to yuh!"

"It'll cost you an even thousand."

The silence became oppressive. Snyder moved uneasily. He had cut the cards; it couldn't be a set deal.

Only one chance to beat his Queens. The boy had bluffed him yesterday. "Hell! Y've called."

Rusty flipped his hole card. It was the Ace of Hearts. Mathewson sighed gustily. "They call that backin' an Ace in the hole, Snyder," Rusty murmured. "Your revenge ain't workin'!"

A hum of comment from the spectators drowned the ruffle of the cards as Malone shuffled. "He pushed Snyder to bet against his flush comin' up, and then hooked him when he paired his Ace!" "Paired on the last card, too!" "That's luck!" "Maybe. Or damn' smart poker. He was dealin'!"

"That breaks me, Barnes. My checks good?" Snyder tossed a check book open, on the table.

"Not with me! I might sleep late, and you'd beat me to the bank! You own this place. Cash your own check!"

Snyder returned with a thick sheaf of yellow bills; laid them on the table before him. The game went on. The pile of currency before Snyder dwindled away into murderous, reckless pots—built up briefly as he took a hand—fell again. Chips were disregarded now. Bets were made and called with fluttering bank notes. Here was money in action!

Before midnight Snyder again had recourse to the heavy safe in the Lone Star office. He was desperate now—hands trembling a little as he fingered his cards. The strain was telling. Poker at reckless stakes is no game for men to whom money is everything.

An hour later Malone dealt the final hand. Rusty's top card was a Queen—and it paired a Queen in the hole. He bet. Snyder raised, with an Ace. Rusty's third card was a ten—Snyder's an Ace to pair. He fingered the last of his bills thoughtfully—pushed them across the table. "Better get out," he growled.

"No." Rusty called. His next card was a ten; two pairs. "Bet your Aces," he said.

"Check 'em." Snyder's stack was gone now.

"Two thousand dollars against —a bill of sale for one hundred Circle W steers!"

Snyder started. He glanced carefully at the card he held in the hole —reached into his pocket and slid a folded paper across the board. "Call," he whispered.

Malone fumbled the deck very slightly as he leaned forward to deal. Rusty's left hand shot out, covering the deck. "Hold it, Malone!"

"What the hell?"

"No one asked for a cut! You're too damned anxious. *I'll* cut."

"Damn yuh, Barnes—what do yuh mean?"

"You had the Ace of Clubs in your hand when you turned down, Malone." Rusty faced Malone's discards. "It's gone! I mean that top card you're dealin' your pal is the Ace of Clubs! You're a damn crook, Malone, and a poor one!"

The table swayed drunkenly as Malone lurched to his feet. Rusty's gun cleared the table blazing. Malone's shot roared almost in cadence. Rusty's hat leaped and fell behind him, neatly punctured. Malone staggered back—crumpled suddenly and slumped down to the floor.

Rusty's gun swept the circle of startled faces. "You can take your gun off him now, Dan," he murmured. Mathewson shrugged; removed his naked Colt from Snyder's shoul-

der blades and holstered it. Snyder's right hand, poised where it had started on its way to his holster, dropped limp.

Rusty leaned forward; removed the top card from the deck on the table—faced it. It was the Ace of Clubs. He held it up, silently.

"You and me will cut the deck—with the Ace of Clubs *out*—for our last cards, Snyder."

Snyder squared the deck; cut it; faced his fifth card. "I'm broke," he whined. "Draw your card for the pot."

Swiftly, Rusty cut and drew. His card was a seven. He faced his hand: two pairs, Queens up on tens. Snyder held his Ace pair. The game was ended.

Rusty bulked the heap of currency before him into a neat rectangle and stacked his chips swiftly. The bartender cashed the chips and Rusty added the bills to the stack. He stopped quickly, his eyes still alert, and recovered his fallen Stetson.

"Dan, you saw the shootin'. You want me?"

"Hell, no! Malone went for his gun first. He was too slow." He turned to the crowd. "Ain't that the way you saw it, boys?" A series of nods answered, and a voice: "You're wrong, Dan! Malone wasn't slow. That red head was too damned fast!"

The tension was broken somewhat by the nervous laugh provoked, and Rusty stuffed his winnings into his pockets. "Snyder, if you're still cravin' revenge—"

"Go to hell!" Snyder's face was drawn with anger.

"Thank you kindly; I probably will meet you there. Dan, you mind walkin' along with me? I feel sort of—overloaded."

He walked to the door, the sheriff's huge figure swaggering behind him watchfully, and then both disappeared through the gloomy square to the street.

In Rusty's room, Dan Mathewson fingered a deck of playing cards on the table. "How much you win, Rusty?" he asked.

"A hundred head of Circle W steers!"

"And somewheres about twenty thousand in rustlin' paper, I reckon!" said Dan. "Say. Rusty, that time yuh paired your Ace against Snyder's Queens—looked like you was bettin' a flush. He had yuh beat up to that last card. Wasn't yuh overcrowdin' yer luck some, lad?"

Rusty made a quick little grimace. "I was dealin', Dan," he said.

"Sure. But Snyder cut just before the last draw—and you dealt with one hand."

Rusty stepped to the table and took the deck from the sheriff's hands, fanned it, selected the Ace of Spades. "Snyder's a thief, Dan—stole the Lucky 'Leven from my mother and killed my dad." He placed the Ace on top of the deck. "Cut the cards." Mathewson cut them; reformed the deck. Rusty picked up the cards with his right hand, his left held clear; met Mathewson's eyes with a smile. Perhaps there was a blurred movement of that right hand, just a barely perceptible jerk. Then Rusty slid the top card out and held it toward Mathewson. It was—the Ace of Spades.

"I told you to cut 'em, Dan!"

"And, by God, cut 'em I did! Well, I'll just be damned!" He

chuckled deeply; slapped the table with a hamlike hand and broke into a roar of laughter. "No wonder yuh caught Malone stackin' th' deck! 'That's what you call backin' an Ace in th' hole, Snyder,' " he quoted. The boom of his laughter filled the room.

In the Lone Star, nearly empty now, Snyder still sat at the deserted table, a partially emptied bottle beside his hand. What a fool! How many thousands had he tossed away to that grinning, redheaded boy? And Malone—dead. Never knew what hit him. What a fiend the boy was with a gun! Well—there were other irons in the fire. His eyes focused on a coiled object on the floor. He stooped; picked it up. His face lost its heavy gloom and twisted into a smile. He glanced at his watch; there was still time. He ran out the door to his horse at the rack. The echo of pounding hoofs resounded against the hollow walls as a shadowy horseman dashed down the street to the open country beyond.

CHAPTER VII

SMOKEY turned without breaking stride into the only trail he knew. His master was riding but one trail these days—the trail that led to a ranch house beside a shaded spring whose cool waters gurgled pleasantly against Smokey's nose as he drank. Perhaps Tin Cup Springs was the object, too, of his master's visits.

Rusty dropped down from the saddle beside the wide veranda and tossed Smokey's reins free. "Hello, the house," he called, gayly.

" 'Light and look at your saddle, stranger!" came the answer from within.

"Since when am I a stranger?" he complained.

"Oh, hello, Rusty!" Jack appeared now in the doorway. "Did you expect me to recognize your voice?"

"Didn't you?" He regarded her accusingly.

"Well-l—maybe! Come up and have a chair."

"I should have shot out a couple of windows, or something, so you'd know who was callin'! Snyder ain't showed up with his bill of sale yet, has he?"

"No. Carl hasn't come home yet, and I haven't had the boys round up the cattle for him. I won't, either! He can wait for Carl!"

"Now, now, young lady, bein' stubborn is plumb bad manners! I come out on purpose to see about them same cows." Gravely he extended a folded paper toward her.

She looked up from the paper, startled. "Why—it's—"

"It's a bill of sale for one hundred head of Circle W cow-critters." Rusty recovered the bill—tore it deliberately in half, and finally into tiny bits. He held them out and allowed them to flutter down upon Jack's head. "But—I ain't got a bit of use for Circle W stock," he said.

"Rusty! But how—?"

"I made a bet with Snyder. You see, he thought two Aces beat Queens and tens. He was wrong."

She dropped here eyes before his and turned half away. "Why have you done so much for me? I can't thank you."

He was very near her suddenly; touched her arms gently. "You needn't thank me. Don't you *know* why I want to do things for you?"

She raised her head to gaze away across the rolling prairie land, the

smooth crown of her hair very near to Rusty's face. He could not see her eyes, nor the little smile that touched the corners of her lips. But he heard her question, half whispered: "Why—Rusty?"

He swung her about to face him—tilted her face up to meet his eyes. "Because I love you, Jack. Didn't you know?"

She waited, her head thrown back, her lips half parted. "Aren't you—going to kiss me, then?" she breathed.

This time it was his voice, low and husky: "Why?"

"Because I love you. Didn't you know?"

Later—much later indeed—they lunched together once more in the cool shade of the porch. It was an hour stolen from destiny. A calm which reigned supremely for a short time before the ever-gathering storm clouds.

CHAPTER VIII

DAN MATHEWSON awakened to a troublesome day. While he breakfasted came news changing the meal to a hastened process of gulped coffee and wolfed food.

"The express messenger was held up last night—$30,000 payroll for the mine stolen!" The messenger had ridden hard for Lodestone to put the wheels of the law in motion and sat now while the Sheriff ate, imparting details. "There was a Wells-Fargo guard with the stuff as usual. Powell, from the mine, went to meet the train. They'd just shoved the box out and the train had started, when it happened. Four men pulled the job—stepped out from behind the water tank and started shootin'. They got Powell, first shot. The guard held 'em off for a while—got one of 'em, Carl Wilson."

"The hell yuh say!" Mathewson cut in. "So Wilson was clear bad! Killed him?"

"Yeah. This Wells-Fargo guy was usin' a sawed-off pump gun. Wilson's dead all right. The guy was game, him alone against that gang. Even after they'd hit him, he clinched with one of 'em when they came in to get the money; hung on till somebody hit him over the head with a gun butt! In the mix-up, this hold-up fella dropped somethin' that ought to be a good clue." The man extended a braided bit of leather towards Mathewson. "Ever seen that before?"

Mathewson took the object in his hand; a hat band, curiously looped and braided of hand-softened leather and white horsehair. Where the braid joined to form the loop, the ends were plaited in a bridle-knot, and the two loose ends tipped with snake rattles—each with eleven rattles and a button."

"Yes, I've seen it. Belongs to Rusty Barnes." Dan looked up inquiringly. "How d'yuh reckon this hold-up fella happened to have it?"

The messenger laughed shortly. "I reckon that's not such a mystery, Sheriff. This Rusty's a friend o' yours—but I reckon you can't let that hinder yuh now. A lot o' people seen that band when Barnes was gamblin' with Snyder over at the Lone Star. It's an odd thing and noticeable. Barnes was flashin' a healthy roll, too, for an ordinary cowpunch. I reckon he made a mistaks not havin' this thing sewed on his hat."

"Go on! Rusty was playin' poker at the Star till after midnight last

night. I went with him to his room, afterward. Rusty ain't no road agent!"

"This hold-up happened about 4:30 this mornin'. It's only eight miles from here to the Junction. Plenty o' time for Barnes to get over there, all right! And he ain't in his room now. Some of us went to see."

" 'Course he ain't. He said last night he was ridin' out to the Circle W. Wanted to ease Miss Jack's mind about that bill-of-sale he won from Snyder. I ain't goin' to make a fool o' myself takin' in an innocent man while the guilty parties get away." Mathewson finished his coffee and stood up. "I'm goin' to the Junction, pick up the trail and follow it. And I won't find no red-headed kid at the end of it, either!"

"I reckon yuh ain't got much choice, Dan." The messenger was standing now, also. "The boys over at the mine are right het up over this killin' and over their pay bein' took. They're convinced this Barnes kid done it. You gotta admit, Dan, it ain't likely he'd 'a' given his hat band to someone else between the time he was playin' with Snyder and the time it was dropped over at the Junction. The miners are demandin' action and they want Barnes! You gotta get him!"

Mathewson found the situation very much as his early visitor had stated. The men of the mines, incensed by the death of the chief and the loss of their pay, swarmed the street in angry groups demanding instant action. The sheriff's appearance was a signal and he was surrounded at once by a constantly growing crowd of men.

"You men are crazy! Barnes ain't the outlaw. What you want is a posse on the trail startin' at Junction. I'll vouch for Barnes, myself!"

"Vouch for him, hell! We want him here!"

It was useless to argue. Rusty's absence was an added cause for suspicion. Snyder, present, and active partisan with the miners, pointed out that Barnes was "thick with that Miller girl, ridin' out there all the time. He was there yesterday. He was probably friends with Wilson, too; mighta known him before he came here. The sheriff says Barnes is out at the Circle W now. Why don't he go there and get him, then? If he's innocent it ought to be easy to prove."

"O' course Rusty's trimmin' you at poker, an' interferin' with yer little play for Miss Miller ain't influencin' yuh against him, is it, Snyder?" Dan's wrathful sarcasm challenged Snyder across the mob.

"Not a damn bit more than your friendship is influencin' you in his favor, Dan!" Snyder's answer was well timed. "If he's at th' Circle W, like you say, why don't yuh go get him?"

"By God, I'll do it! And I hope it'll satisfy the pack of yuh! Serve yuh right if the bandits get clear away with your payroll, too, while I'm chasin' an innocent man!"

But they were not content that Mathewson should go alone. Snyder's suggestion that a group of men "not too friendly to Barnes" accompany the sheriff was favorably met, and when Mathewson rode out of Lodestone towards the Circle W he was accompanied by a dozen dour-faced men, firmly bent on seeing justice administered.

Jacqueline was first to notice the posse's approach. She pointed it

out to Rusty and they watched curiously as it neared the ranch. Mathewson left his men at the turn leading into the ranch. "I'll go in alone," he said. "Rusty won't make me any trouble." He dismounted and walked forward alone, his steps surprisingly graceful and light for one of his bulk.

Rusty greeted him as he neared the step. "Hello, Dan! Come on up and hear the news! Your friends yonder scared we got smallpox?"

"Howdy, Miss Jack." Mathewson removed his hat with a certain elegance that became him well. "Howdy, Rusty. I'm plumb sorry to interrupt, an' sorrier that I'm out here on a damn-fool errand. "I've got bad news."

"Lord, Dan! Startin' like that, we're expectin'—"

"Nothin' much worse than the facts. Miss Jack, yer brother was shot last night, holdin' up the messenger carryin' the mine payroll."

Jack gripped Rusty's arm. "Killed?"

"Yes, miss. I'm sorry to have to tell yuh. And, Rusty, one of the men that did the job dropped this." He extended the braided hat cord.

Rusty's eyes narrowed. The presence of the men waiting yonder was easily explained now. "Yeah; it it's mine, Dan. Missed it last night. You wantin' me for that hold-up, Dan?"

"I know you didn't do it, lad. But them yaps think you did, and I got to take yuh in."

"Sure, Dan." Rusty turned to Jack, her face white and still. "I wish I could comfort you some way, sweetheart."

"I know, Jack. But I don't understand their wantin' you. Why, Rusty?"

"They found my hat band where the robbery occurred, see? I lost it, and whoever found it left it there. Dan's takin' me for a show, that's all."

"They'll wait, won't they, till I change my clothes? I'm going in with you, Mr. Mathewson, if I may? I'll have to go, to—about Carl."

"Sure, Miss Jack."

Rusty watched until she disappeared inside the door. "That's hell, Dan; her brother killed, and that way, too. I've some *good* news to balance yours, though it's a poor time to tell. We love each other. She's promised to marry me."

"Boy, I'm proud of yuh!" Dan's big hand grasped hard on Rusty's slender one. "She's a fine girl, sure. But, lad—this business is apt to be serious, I'm warnin' yuh. Didn't want to scare her, but—the miners are crazy mad, and they think you're their man. Powell was killed in the fracas and the payroll taken. Snyder's circulatin' among 'em, eggin' 'em on against yuh. There's apt to be trouble."

"You mean—a lynch mob, Dan?"

The sheriff nodded slowly. "They're plumb wild, Rusty," he said. "You might throw your gun on me, lad. You're so fast they'd have to admit I couldn't stop yuh. We couldn't catch Smokey, give yuh a start."

Rusty shook his head. "No. It won't do, Dan. I can't run away—from her, now." Mathewson nodded. "Don't take my gun unless you have to and if it comes to a fight, give me a chance at Snyder! I ain't scared, Dan! This is my lucky day!"

CHAPTER IX

IT WAS a grim little procession that rode down the board street in Lodestone late that after-

noon; Sheriff Mathewson, Rusty Barnes riding beside Jacqueline Miller, and twelve serious men, saddle-weary but satisfied in the performance of a duty. And the crowds who watched their passing were grimmer still. Their very silence was ominous, and the black looks they cast upon the man they had already condemned were bitter with hatred.

A milling crowd of men about the little jail parted slowly to give them passage. On the low porch at the front door, Mathewson paused a moment. "I'll take yer gun now, Rusty," he said.

Rusty slid the gun from its leather, flipped it butt foremost and held it out. Mathewson took it; jammed it in his belt.

The jail was built of rough clapboard siding in two rooms, intended primarily as a shelter in which uproarious drunks might sleep off their destructive moods. The back window was boarded up and the door between was barred on the side of the front room. Inside the crude cell Mathewson removed the gun from his belt and handed it to Rusty. "I just wanted to show 'em you was a willin' prisoner," he whispered. "Stick it inside your shirt. Yuh might need it."

"Thanks, Dan. Look out for Jack, won't you?"

"I sure will, son."

Mathewson stepped into the outer room, barring the door behind him. From pegs over the door he lifted a short, repeating shotgun; kicked a chair into the doorway, and sat down, the shotgun laid suggestively across his knees. With studied deliberation he produced a short, blackened pipe; filled it carefully, lighted it and blew an elaborate streamer of smoke toward the crowd outside. Sheriff Dan Mathewson was quite plainly in command of the situation.

Sometime later Mathewson tipped the ashes from his pipe and let his chair tilt forward quietly. The crowd that had filled the little space before the jail was gone now and his vigil was no longer favored with an audience. He slid the bar free in the inner door and called inside: "Rusty?"

"Yeah, Dan."

"Crowd's gone now, but—I can hear 'em down the street. They're mad. Reckon they're workin' up to th' point where trouble'll just nacherly have to come. I've seen it happen before. If they come after yuh we ain't got a chance. We'd take some of 'em with us, but they'd get yuh. You just got to pull out, lad. Not now, 'cause yuh'd sure run into some of 'em. There's gangs all over town. But they'll all herd together if they come aimin' to break jail, and then's your chance. I'll—"

A quick step at the front caused Mathewson to whirl, the shotgun half raised.

"Never mind shootin' me with that scatter-cannon, Dan!" The man stepped inside quickly, out of sight from the door.

"Oh! It's you, Slim."

"Yeah. Us boys heard about the trouble and rode in."

"Rusty, this is Slim Williams, Miss Jack's foreman. An' this is Rusty Barnes, Slim."

"I'm right glad to know yuh, fella. My boss is a heap interested in yuh, seems as how!" Slim grinned cordially. "Miss Jack is over at your house, Dan. She asked us boys to circulate around and see what's brewin'. And it's plenty!

Snyder's thumbin' these pick-swingers up to make a lynchin' party of it, and things are hot. We figured it out that th' gang'll get together and try t' bluff yuh into givin' up yer prisoner. Me and the boys'll be right with the gang, in the front row. We'll throw our guns along with yours. I come over to tell yuh so yuh wouldn't shoot first and talk afterward—which would be a heap oncomfortable for us! That ought t' give Barnes a chance to make a getaway. I got his horse saddled and tied just back of your house and my bronc is standin' back of the jail here. If yuh take my advice you'll fade. Snyder aims to see that yuh swing, Barnes!"

A throaty roar of voices, muffled somewhat by distance, broke into the silence. The three men exchanged meaning glances.

"I reckon it won't be long now." Slim slipped to the door; peered outside carefully. "I'll be goin', now. You can depend on us, Dan. Here's luck, Barnes!" He was gone instantly, disappearing into the darkness outside.

Mathewson sprang quickly to the barred window. Using the shotgun as a lever he ripped away at the planking until only a few loosened nails held it in place.

"There's a door for yuh, Rusty," he grunted. "Use it when the time comes. First time I ever helped a prisoner to escape, but I ain't wantin' to see yuh dancin' on air for Snyder and that gang of hoodlums!"

"Thanks, Dan. Only—I ain't goin' to run and leave you to fight it out alone."

"Don't be a fool! If it's a fight, two of us ain't no better than one against that mob. And you got someone else to think of now, besides yerself. Anyway, I don't want to have to shoot it out with 'em. I'll stand 'em up with a bluff as long as I can, to give you time for a break. There won't be no fight."

Rusty nodded slowly. "All right, Dan. Thanks."

Mathewson resumed his seat at the door and lit his pipe again. There was no light in the jail now, other than the dim glow that fell through the open door from the lighted buildings opposite.

The noise of the crowd grew steadily nearer, swelling as the distance decreased and as new groups were added to its numbers. It burst suddenly into the full bay as the leaders came in sight of the little jail. Lanterns carried by members of the mob threw a circle of uncertain light ahead.

They advanced more slowly now, those in the rear crowding those ahead until the space before the jail was thickly packed with men. Set between two large buildings and slightly back from the street, the jail door commanded a restricted front. The front line of the mob halted a few paces from the door.

Mathewson stood up, his shotgun balanced in the crook of his arm. "Howdy, boys," he called casually. A growling murmur answered him. "You wantin' somethin' special?" he asked.

"We want your prisoner, Dan! And we aim to get him!" Snyder spoke, stepping slightly ahead of the crowd.

"Sure, Snyder, I guessed as much! Well—" the shotgun canted suggestively—"yuh can't have him! I'm keepin' my prisoners, same as I've always done."

Snyder stepped forward slowly

and the crowd followed, the leaders edging in behind their spokesman.

"Hold it—right there!" Mathewson's big voice stopped the advance. "You men know me—and I'm talkin' turkey! Snyder, you're on the dead line! First man that crosses that line, I'll blow him apart!"

Snyder stepped back hastily. A number of men in the front of the crowd were moving uneasily. Several turned now and pushed back into the throng. Mathewson caught a glimpse of one of these in a brighter spot of light. It was Slim Williams, foreman of the Circle W.

Slowly, the front line of the crowd thinned. The crowd moved back to a safer distance. Snyder spoke in low tones to the leaders. The talk became a gradually growing murmur. Mathewson leaned back against the door, with his shotgun still menacing and reflecting the light in a thin circle of bright steel like an unwinking, solemn eye.

A low chuckle in the darkness behind him almost served to distract the sheriff's attention from the business at hand. He half turned, startled. A quiet voice reassured him:

"Looks like your bluff went over, Dan."

"Rusty!" Mathewson's husky whisper combined relief and disappointment. "Why in hell ain't you out o' here?"

"Shucks, Dan, they mighta called your hand! I couldn't slide out leavin' you in a jam like that. I stayed to back up your play. Snyder wasn't so eager for fightin' while he was right up front there, was he? Never mind, Dan. I'm goin' now. They won't do nothin' more than talk for a while now; and if they get nasty again you won't have to make your bluff so strong, knowin' I'm out of it all right. Adios, amigo."

The faint sound of his step across the floor barely reached the sheriff's ears. Rusty stopped for a moment beside the window at the back, straining to catch any sound from without. There was none and he pushed the loosed boards aside. Silent as a shadow, he swung his legs across the sill; dropped lightly to the ground.

A movement at his left held him tense, still crouched from his fall. A man had stepped from around the corner of the building and walked now almost within reach of Rusty's hand—passed him and stood for an instant beside the horse whose outline was barely distinguishable in the darkness. As if some suggestion of the possible meaning of the horse's presence had entered his mind, the man turned and strode toward the window.

The covering darkness kept him unaware of the crouching figure at the base of the wall until he was almost upon it. He halted suddenly—dropped his hand to his hip.

Rusty straightened as a snake strikes from coil, his right hand cutting a swift arc from the ground to the white oval that was the man's face.

There was a sharp impact of hard knuckles on flesh. Rusty swung again, this time with his left, and the man reeled backward. As he fell, Rusty was upon him, pinning him to the ground. But that first blow had done the work. The body under him was limp, and Rusty leaped to the horse's side. Jerking the rope from the saddle, he stooped again over the fallen figure; twisted

the man's scarf into the relaxed mouth; bound hands and feet securely in the turns of the lariat.

The brief struggle had lasted hardly a minute. Rusty caught the dragging reins of the waiting horse and glanced back. Evidently his fallen foe had been alone in his tour of investigation. Rusty spoke a soothing word as he mounted. There was no protest and he settled into the saddle, guiding his mount into the deep shadows at the rear of the building. Slowly, with painstaking caution, they stole away, leaving the murmur of the crowd behind.

Back of Sheriff Mathewson's home Rusty dismounted beside another waiting horse whose low whinny and exploring nose gave him warm welcome. He stood for a moment in indecision. The square of light in the window yonder seemed a glimpse of heaven from utter darkness.

"Just a minute, Smokey, boy." He patted the silken nose reassuringly and ran to the window. Through it, Jack's profile was plain in the lighted room. He tapped softly on the pane and she glanced up quickly. An instant later she was in his arms, breathless and trembling.

"Rusty! You're safe!"

His answer was a torrent of kisses upon her soft hair. When he released her it was to catch both her hands in his, speaking swiftly: "Snyder raised a mob, and Dan was afraid they'd lynch me. He let me go. I've a hunch I can name the men who shot Powell, and I'm goin' to prove it. But I've got to lay low, or these miners'll have me in jail again, or hung. Don't you worry, sweetheart—please! I know a place where I'll be safe, and it won't be long. Tell Dan I'm playin' a hunch. Maybe I can bring him some prisoners he'll feel more like keepin' than the one he had today. And don't forget I love you, Jack. Always!"

"Oh, I won't forget, Rusty—and I love you, too. Be careful and come back to me soon? I'm going back to the ranch tomorrow so you'll find me there. I'll be waiting—"

In a little store far out at the end of Lodestone's business street a Mexican merchant served a tall stranger with supplies calculated to provide an experienced camper with food for some days. He was surprised that such a one rode out of Lodestone when in the city, *por Dios,* was such excitement—fighting and drinking and noise. But, as his customer said, business waits not on such things. The stranger paid generously for his wares.

CHAPTER X

MATHEWSON felt a subtle change in the attitude of the crowd facing him across the little arena before the jail. The growling undertone of their talk was changed now to a crisper, more self-assertive note. Mathewson sensed an air of expectancy in their waiting now, and wondered. Snyder swaggered out at last, stopping carefully clear of the dead line.

"Dan, you still aimin' to be a fool about this?" He smiled provocatively.

"I'm still aimin' to keep a bunch of hoodlums from breakin' jail on me!"

Snyder laughed aloud. "Look behind you, Dan," he suggested. "Your jail's already broke!"

The smell of smoke came suddenly on an eddying wind. It left its acrid

sting in Mathewson's nostrils. He whirled and dashed inside the jail. The back room was empty. Whoever had set the fire had ignored the window. Snyder greeted him with a laugh as he returned to the door.

"Bring out your prisoner, Dan. We want him!"

"Stick around, Snyder! The fire may die down," Mathewson replied.

They waited, wondering, their fear of the determined sheriff and his gun holding them at bay. As the fire ate its way toward the front of the building the crowd hovered nearer. The front room became an inferno and Mathewson stepped away. He walked down toward Snyder; turned to look back as the jail roof fell with a crash.

"Nice bonfire, Snyder. Better watch it don't catch these other buildings. Good night, men."

"Say!" A voice from the crowd caused the sheriff to turn. "Where th' hell is Barnes?"

"Barnes? Oh, I put him away where he'd be safe, long ago!"

Snyder forced his way inside the circle about the sheriff and faced Mathewson, his face dark with anger. "You mean yuh let him go! A hell of a sheriff you are! This'll cost yuh your job, Mathewson!"

"I'd rather lose a prisoner than give him up to a mob, Snyder. I ain't so keen about the job, anyway. But I'll stick—until I've broke you and your gang!" Mathewson's hard jaw was thrust out and he leaned closer to Snyder.

"Damn yuh, Mathewson!" Snyder dropped his hand to his gun, his lips drawn in a snarl. The shotgun in Mathewson's right hand swung up and steadied. Snyder looked squarely down its yawning bore.

Snyder relaxed, his hand falling from the gun, his face suddenly white.

"I guess you'll have to go on hirin' men to do your killin'," Mathewson said. "Seems like y' ain't able t' do it yerself."

He glanced up inquiringly as a group of horsemen drew up on the outskirts of the crowd. In the silence following the little drama just enacted, the voice of one of the newcomers carried distinctly: "We're lookin' for Sheriff Mathewson."

The crowd gave way grudgingly as Mathewson strode through. "Right here, stranger," he called. "I'm Daniels, sheriff of Brown County, Mathewson." The speaker leaned from his saddle and extended his hand. "What's th' crowd about?" he asked.

Mathewson shrugged, depreciatingly. "Oh, these boys was cravin' a little necktie party with a prisoner o' mine as the guest of honor. He got away while they was argyin' with me."

"I see." Daniels nodded and smiled appreciatively. "Rather run him down again than bury him, eh, Sheriff? We'd like to talk with yuh some. Yuh got time?"

"Sure. Be right with yuh." He paused inquiringly as a new diversion stirred the crowd. A gesticulating Mexican was shoved toward him and Mathewson waited. "What's this?" he inquired.

"This greaser sold Barnes a grubstake as he was leavin' town. Wants a reward or somethin' fer tellin' which way he went." Someone laughed dryly.

"*Si*, señor. He buy food—pay me, so." He held up a yellow-backed bill. "You ask which way he—"

"Let's see that twenty!" Sheriff Daniels swung his horse closer and took the bill—consulted a slip of paper from his pocket—looked at Mathewson curiously. "This bird that give yuh the slip, Sheriff—he ain't ridin' a black hoss, is he?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I'm looking for a hombre who stuck up a gamblin' joint in Juarez about a week ago and come across th' river, with about four thousand in currency, mostly twenties. This is one of 'em. Yuh see, this joint kept a record of the money they used bankin' their games."

Snyder leered provocatively at Mathewson. "Looks like your friendship for Barnes made yuh miss a bet, eh, Sheriff?"

Mathewson's face was serious as he spoke to Daniels. "There's something wrong, Daniels, sure. I had a man here to-night—Rusty Barnes—charged with this payroll robbery an' killin' over at Junction. I ain't denyin' I let him go, and I'd do it again! This mob woulda lynched him, and I know he ain't guilty. Why, I've knowed that kid since he was knee high! He ain't your man, any more than he's the man that killed Powell!"

"That's what *you* think, Mathewson!" Snyder shoved forward and spoke loudly enough to be heard by the crowd. "You're prejudiced, that's all! This guy Barnes comes blowin' in here with a big roll. Yuh all saw he was flush. And we know already that he killed Powell. His hat band found over there proves that."

A throaty murmur of approval spread easily.

"I reckon yuh made a mistake lettin' your man go so easy, Sheriff." Daniels, too, was convinced.

They were isolated for a moment in the noise of the crowd, and Mathewson spoke aside to Daniels. "You're plumb wrong, Daniels. This lad is a deputy United States Marshal, up here on special duty. He ain't a crook!"

"Did yuh see his commission?" Daniels was skeptical.

"No, but—"

Daniels laughed shortly. "I ain't blamin' yuh, Mathewson. He was a friend of yours and you couldn't be expected to suspicion him, I reckon. But I'm goin' after him, just t' make sure."

"Go to it! Yuh got my permission. *I'm* goin' on th' trail of the men that shot Powell. I reckon we won't meet on them trails! Adios!" Dan Mathewson elbowed his way through the crowd.

There was a light burning in the little cottage as Mathewson climbed the steps to his porch, and Jack swung the door wide before he reached it.

"He's gone, Dan," she whispered, her eyes brilliant in the lamp glow. "He said he had a hunch he'd bring you some other prisoners soon."

"He might, at that." Mathewson patted her shoulders reassuringly. "That is, if he can keep out o' trouble himself."

"Dan, you ain't goin' out a-huntin' that poor boy again, are you?" Mrs. Mathewson paused for lack of words.

"There, Ma, don't get het up, now. I ain't goin' after Rusty. I hope he rides clean south to Mexico till this blows over! But there's others that will be lookin' for him." Briefly he told of Daniels' arrival and its effect upon the excited miners. "They'll be scourin' the country by daylight," he finished,

dubiously. "And you can't blame Daniels for bein' sure Rusty's the man he wants, either. It all fits together mighty slick."

Jacqueline's knees felt strangely weak and she sank down into a chair, her senses reeling. A black horse, shod on all four feet. How well she remembered him, rearing high in the little canyon pass, his sleek coat glistening, his feet ringing upon the rocky floor. In a flash she recalled Rusty's tense expectancy as they waited for Snyder's men. Was this the pursuit he had feared?

Other memories flooded in, and she lifted her head bravely. It was all a mistake, surely. Vividly she saw his boyish smile—recalled the clean depth in his eyes and his gentle voice. He was a gunman. He had explained that, and she could understand his passion for revenge. He had killed Malone. But that was self-defense and justifiable according to the code of the West.

"You ain't believin' it, Miss Jack?" Mathewson's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"No!" She looked up quickly, her dark eyes meeting his. "I love him! He's not an outlaw."

"That's the girl!" Dan's beaming smile was a reward in itself and Jacqueline returned it thankfully.

A hurried step at the door took Mathewson's attention. It was Slim Williams.

"Just wanted to tell yuh, Dan—Daniels is startin' with a posse right away. Snyder's goin', and I'm aimin' to trail along. That hombre is a heap interested in seein' Barnes caught. The rest of the Circle W boys is over at the Cattlemen's. They'll be waitin' for orders from you or Miss Jack."

"One of the boys can ride home with me in the morning, Slim. I'll be out there, if you want to find me," Jacqueline promised.

Mathewson was gone when Jacqueline awakened the next morning, and Shorty Wood, one of the men Slim Williams had left at the Cattlemen's Hotel, awaited her start to the Circle W. Despite Mathewson's protests, Jack was firm in her determination to return to the ranch. "There's nothing I can do here and I told Rusty I'd be there, waiting for him."

CHAPTER XI

ONCE clear of the last of Lodestone's scattered dwellings, Smokey tossed his head to newly loosened reins and lengthened his stride to the mile-eating gallop he could hold for hours. The sky was splotched with tumbled clouds and the night air was a relief from the day's heat.

A mile from town a rocky wash intercepted their path and the trail leading up from it was loose gravel. Rusty turned here to follow the draw. His trail from town would be plain. Here, he added a preliminary puzzle for pursuers to solve. The trail ahead would leave no mark to show whether he had gone on or turned—and the rocky floor of the wash was equally unreadable.

Smokey picked his way carefully along the ravine as it swept a wide half circle; turned up its bank where a hard-packed cattle path gave access to the springy sod of the level prairie, and stretched again to a faster pace. They were angling up the side of the mesa now toward the Circle W. Beyond it lay the deserted ranch buildings of what had been the Lucky 'Leven,

and Rusty was going home.

He circled clear of the Circle W, keeping to the unmarked grasslands to the north. Jacqueline was in town and the ranch was dark and empty of life—yet the shadowy blurs of the buildings seemed alive with memories as he rode past them. She would return in the morning, she said, and wait for him there. Rusty wondered how long it might be before he sat with her again on the deep veranda.

Rusty's "hunch" was the product of careful thinking, begun with Mathewson's first mention of the hold-up at Junction. The hat cord which played so important a part had been in place when he dressed before the poker game. He had noticed its looseness and made a mental note to sew it more securely; missed it when he tossed the hat from his bunk after Mathewson's departure. It could have been dropped at only one time, then, when Malone's bullet knocked the hat to the floor in the Lone Star. No one would have noticed it in the tenseness of the following moments.

Someone, then, had carried it from the Lone Star to Junction. In Rusty's mind there was no doubt as to that someone's identity. He was as sure of Snyder's part in the hold-up as though he had seen him there with his own eyes. Merritt and North had not been seen in town that night—nor had Carl Wilson.

Snyder was in town now, urging the miners to further fury. It was a smart rôle for him. Its success would accomplish two ends; it would end the search for the slayer of Powell, and would effectively dispose of Snyder's personal enemy. Rusty smiled grimly. Snyder's game was deep.

They swung into the trail again and followed it to where it angled down to the deep niche through which the run from Tincup Springs flowed towards the mesa's rim. As Smokey paused at the top of the descent a crisp voice spoke from the darkness below: "Stick 'em up, Malone! Figgered you'd ditched me, didn't yuh?"

There was no sense in fighting a voice. Rusty raised his hands shoulder high and waited. If the man wanted Malone he would discover his mistake soon enough.

"Yuh dirty hound!" The voice was bitter and hard. "Yuh crossed me! Left me waitin' in the brush while yuh pulled it with Snyder. Well, by God, I'm gettin' my share —and more, too! You're through, Malone! I'm goin' to bore yuh like a coyote—and I'll get Merritt and North, too!"

There was a pause and Rusty spoke, quietly. "I reckon you've made a mistake, stranger. Malone is dead."

There was a muttered curse from the darkness; then the stealthy sound of footsteps. A darker blur of shadow gradually took form as the man drew near.

"Yuh ain't Malone—voice ain't right. Sit steady. Nope, I don't know yuh, I reckon. Who the hell are yuh, and whatcha doin' with Malone's hoss? Yuh say he's dead?"

The gun in his hand gleamed dully in the half light and it held a steady menace. Rusty sat still, his hands still raised.

"My name is Barnes. And this ain't Malone's horse. Malone was shot last night in a gunplay over cards in Lodestone."

"The hell! Rusty Barnes, eh?

I've heard o' yuh, down in Mexico. Malone was fast—who shot him?"

"I shot him."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The gun lowered slightly and the man shook his head thoughtfully. "I saw the big black and I sure thought it was Malone. Say, this is funny!" he chuckled suddenly. "Me layin' for Malone and stickin' up the guy that did the job for me! But —I've talked too damn much; what am I goin' to do with yuh?"

Rusty's right foot stealthily freed from the stirrup, shot out in a sharp kick that sent the threatening gun spinning away. Instantly his own gun swept clear of the holster and steadied level with the man's head. "I'll answer that question, too!" Rusty remarked amiably. "Nothing! Now turn around." The man obeyed slowly, and Rusty slid from the saddle.

After the first startled ejaculation of mingled surprise and pain the stranger uttered no word. He waited silently while Rusty dismounted and stepped nearer.

"Now, since you was so kind as to tell me as much as you did, suppose you go right on talkin'. I'm interested, some."

"And s'pose I say nothin'?" the man muttered.

"That'd be plumb ungrateful, and likewise unhealthy! You ought to show some gratitude for me downin' Malone for you, looks like. And if you don't talk, I'll naturally have to take you apart and see why not!"

The silence held for a long moment. Quite evidently, the man was mentally determining a course of action. When he spoke at last it was with careful deliberation.

"There ain't no reason why I shouldn't talk. I ain't done nothin'. Maybe we could figure it out to work together, seein' as you and Malone weren't friends." The man watched Rusty shrewdly. There was no answer and he went on. "Me and Malone aimed to get this payroll on the road between Junction and Lodestone, and he double crossed me. Pulled it with Snyder, and me waitin' for him to show up like he said he would! I seen Snyder ridin' hell-bent towards Junction, and I followed him. Breezed in just as they was finishin' the job, and Snyder cut down on me. Just missed me. I figgered Malone would be headin' south soon as they split the pot, and I laid for him. He rides a big black like yours, and I thought yuh was him."

Rusty's mind was working rapidly. When he spoke, his voice had regained its old carefree lilt. "I never thought I'd thank a man for stickin' me up," he said. "But I'm sure obliged to you! You and me have both been framed on this job, stranger. Malone frames you, and I down Malone. Snyder frames me, and now you're goin' to help me get Snyder. It works out right pretty. Where's your horse?"

The first gray lights of the coming dawn were changing the gloom of the arroyo to gray, and Rusty glanced about quickly in search of a tethered mount.

"I ain't got a hoss!"

The distant spat of a rifle shot interrupted and a bullet struck a rock beside Smokey's feet and ricochetted in a long, whining curve. The man before Rusty scurried to cover under the coulee wall and Rusty whirled Smokey out of the line of fire.

"What is this, a private war of

yours, or someone aimin' at me?" Rusty asked, petulantly.

"I was just tellin' yuh! I ain't got no hoss, 'cause them hombres yonder killed him. That's North and Merritt over there. Yuh see—well, I lifted that payroll off of 'em last night and they was givin' me a run. Got just here and they dropped my hoss. I stopped 'em comin' down th' bank yonder, and we was just breathin' deep, waitin' fer a break, when yuh come along."

"When I came along—" Rusty repeated.

"Yeah. If yuh'd 'a' been Malone like I thought, I coulda downed yuh and rode out."

Rusty eyed the man speculatively. Merritt and North were as dangerous to him as to the man who had stolen their loot. As a confederate, this man might be trusted, at least so long as a common danger threatened. As a prisoner he would be a dangerous hindrance.

"All right, I'm with you, as far as gettin' them two snakes yonder. We'll talk about the money later. But I got business further on, and them two hombres block my trail. Slide out and get your gun. You got a rifle too, I reckon?"

"Yeah. Up by th' bank, there." The man crawled gingerly past a boulder and recovered his gun while Rusty pulled his own Winchester from its sheath on Smokey's saddle.

"I'm goin' further down the bank," he said as his new ally returned. "Maybe we can draw their fire and get a cross fire on 'em."

"Right! Say, my name's O'Brien, Barnes. I won't forget yuh lendin' a hand. No hard feelin's, eh?"

"Not a feelin', O'Brien!" Rusty grinned cheerfully. "We'll be a big help to each other, looks like, 'fore we're finished!"

Whatever cryptic quality the remark may have had was lost as Rusty sprinted across a space of exposed ground to a more distant cover. Two rifle shots cracked in quick succession. O'Brien threw a hasty reply from his own cover and Rusty pumped a pair of shots from his new hiding place. The battle was on.

As the light strengthened the firing became more and more vicious. Snyder's lieutenants, fearing interruption, were eager to end the affair and recover their lost loot. Rusty, alert for the pursuing posse, was equally impatient. The superior elevation held by North and Merritt on the opposite bank made the situation extremely uncomfortable for the two in the cut.

An hour or more of careful sniping brought no results, both parties firing from cover with extreme caution. Rusty was growing restless.

"Reckon you could keep 'em down if I made a break for the other side?" he called over his shoulder.

"They'd get yuh, sure, Barnes," O'Brien called back. "Still, we gotta do somethin'! I'll keep 'em dodgin' if yuh want to try it."

"Right. Load up the old gun and tell me when you're ready."

In the moment of waiting, Rusty caught a glimpse of a man's shoulder barely exposed on the opposite bank and he squeezed his trigger with that satisfying mental certainty of perfect aim which marksmen know. The shoulder disappeared as the rifle cracked, and Rusty thought he had hit his mark.

"Ready when you are, pardner!"

O'Brien's call came faintly from the rear.

Rusty gathered himself for a quick rush, his revolver in his right hand. The rifle would be a useless burden. If only that last shot was a hit! It was the difference between one rifle and two spitting at him as he ran.

"Here we go, O'Brien!"

He was up with a rush, scurrying like a frightened rabbit in zigzag flight. For an instant the surprise paralyzed the two men across the creek. Then a rifle cracked sharply and Merritt's shout rang out: "It's Barnes! Get him!"

O'Brien was firing now, too. Rusty felt the splash of cold water as he hit the shallow run. When he glanced up again there were two figures silhouetted against the sky above him. Merritt was ramming cartridges into the rifle and North was firing rapidly with a Colt. Rusty noticed North's left arm hanging limp and useless and he smiled grimly. That shot had helped some. His own Colt thundered into deafening echoes against the walls.

It was over suddenly. Rusty slid into the welcome cover of the jutting bank and wiped his forehead with a quick movement. He paused briefly for breath, and then keeping carefully under the protecting face of the cut bank, he crept along its base to where the trail led upward. If Merritt was smart he would be waiting up there where he could command that last stretch of climb.

Rusty went up rapidly in quick dashes from one cover to the next, constantly tensed for the expected shot. Halfway up, and no sound from above. Another dash and the remainder of the slope was vacant of cover. As he watched intently for some hint of ambush above, the rapid clatter of hoofs came to his ears. The sound was above him and ahead.

Springing clear of the sheltering boulder, he ran the remaining thirty yards at a rush. From the top he had an uninterrupted view of the open prairie and down the trail two rapidly diminishing figures rode at breakneck speed in the direction of the JC. Merritt and North had not waited upon the order of their going. North's casualty and the immediate prospect of a fight at close quarters had satisfied their hunger for battle and they had grasped the opportunity for flight.

Rusty sheathed his gun philosophically. No use wasting lead at such a range. And anyway, he was hardly in need of more conflict. He turned and leisurely retraced the course he had taken in such haste a few moments before. The rocky crossing offered slick and uncertain footing. Lucky he hadn't slipped, coming across. O'Brien was keeping strangely quiet.

The sight of the slumped body beside the rocky nook which had been O'Brien's covert brought Rusty out of his lethargy with a jerk. Running once more, he dropped to his knees beside his fallen ally. "O'Brien! Where you hit, pardner?"

As he lifted the man his question was answered by the dark, spreading stain upon the dust-smeared shirt. O'Brien's eyes opened slowly, and he smiled.

"Yuh made it, didn't yuh? That was a game run yuh made, sure."

Rusty hastily applied his best in first aid. The wound was high on the right side; a clean puncture, the

bullet coming out just under the shoulder.

"How'd it happen, O'Brien? I thought both them hombres was shootin' at me!"

"They was, a-plenty! I got excited and stood up so's to shoot faster, and Merritt plugged me just as you made the bank. I kept on bangin' away till I seen yuh comin' back. Then I knowed it was all over, and—I reckon I just fainted."

Rusty's scarf made a fairly secure bandage and O'Brien was able to enjoy the cigarette Rusty made for him. "Them coyotes sloped when yuh got near 'em, eh? It's a shame we didn't get one of their horses. I'll need a bronc if we're goin' to make th' Border. We ought to be startin' pronto, too. Snyder'll never let that dinero go so easy. They'll be back with a gang."

"We ain't headin' for the Border, pardner," Rusty told him. "I told you Snyder framed me. He dropped a hat band of mine convenient to be found on the scene of the hold-up at Junction. Looked bad for me, see?" Then Rusty explained briefly to O'Brien all that happened. "I was ridin' for my health when I met you. I'm aimin' to take you to th' Circle W—it's just a place over yonder and then hunt up Mathewson and spin your yarn to him. That's sort tough luck for you, O'Brien — but I'll promise there won't be no trouble after you've told Mathewson what you have told me."

O'Brien nodded slowly as Rusty finished, and pulled deeply at his cigarette. "I got a cravin' to pack that coin back to Mexico City with me," he said at last. "But I can see your end of it too, amigo. I ain't in no shape to argy with yuh none or to make the Border alone if I did. Besides which, you've done me a coupla favors and I appreciate 'em. I'll back your play with Mathewson. Where's this Circle W place? I crave some coffee and a bed!"

It was the work of a moment to hoist O'Brien into Smokey's saddle; but the journey to the Circle W was a tedious one. The wound in O'Brien's shoulder brought agonized curses from his lips as the motion of the horse pulled at it, and Rusty walked at Smokey's side, one hand steadying the wounded man. And, in a pair of worn saddle bags behind the saddle, the mine payroll rode securely.

Jacqueline was first to recognize the big black horse approaching so slowly, and she darted across the broad ranch yard to meet them.

"Rusty!" Her arms held him as though she would shield him from the whole world.

"I just couldn't be better, sweetheart." He lifted here in his arms and kissed her lips. "Everything's all right, now."

"If this is heaven, where do I get that coffee?" O'Brien clung grimly to the saddle horn and grinned weakly at Rusty.

As he lifted O'Brien from the saddle and carried him inside the house to a couch, Rusty sketched for Jacqueline the story of their meeting and the events following. Hot coffee and bacon and eggs appeared as by magic at her command and the two men ate hungrily.

"So now I'm goin' in to Lodestone and give Mathewson the dope. Snyder and Merritt and North are the three that downed Powell, and I've got the payroll on my saddle. I'm leavin' it here though, with you and Shorty."

"But Mathewson won't be in Lodestone, Rusty. And besides—" She gave him the details of Daniel's arrival, and the additional charges he had made. "And so Dan refused to go with them and rode over to Junction. Daniels and a lot of men are searching the country for you. You can't go, Rusty! If they found you—"

"Shucks, sweetheart! They won't string me up before I say a few things, and when I talk now I can explain the whole thing. It was sweet of you, believin' in me after all that."

"I doubted at first, Rusty—just for a minute. That about the black horse—I remembered Smokey, and the way you seemed to be expecting trouble when Snyder came into the canyon that day. But I knew it couldn't be true."

"I reckon Malone is the guy Daniels wants. O'Brien took me for him because I was ridin' a black horse, same as Malone had. Malone's money was in that poker game, and I reckon I naturally got some of it along with Snyder's. That day in the canyon, I'd seen Snyder comin' before I saw you. I wasn't takin' any chances on him declarin' war at sight. That's why I was on my toes." He laughed tenderly at her fears, and drove the worried frown from her face with kisses. "Don't you worry, honey. There ain't enough sheriffs north of the Border to keep me from comin' back to you! I'll be back before night, sure."

She waved him a good-by kiss and watched Smokey straighten into a long lope as he entered the trail. Romance had come riding for her—would come once more, to stay.

CHAPTER XII

MERRITT and North continued their flight until it seemed certain that no pursuit was intended before they allowed their horses to slacken their pace. North's shoulder was painful and no amount of care in slinging the helpless arm inside his shirt served to relieve it.

Merritt's first remark was not calculated to salve his companion's feelings. "If yuh'd kept down outa sight yuh wouldn't 'a' been hit and we coulda got Barnes. That was a fool break he made, anyhow!"

North groaned dismally. "If yuh wasn't blind in both eyes yuh coulda hit him yerself! Snyder's goin' to be hog wild and raisin' hell—and I don't blame him. We was a pair o' fools lettin' that bird ride in and stick us up like he did."

Merritt pulled up as they neared the JC. "I'm goin' for Snyder. If he shows up here, tell him I'll be back as soon as I can."

Finding the posse in the flatlands to the southward was now apt to be an impossible task. Merritt guessed that they would be scattered, casting about for a trail like a pack of hunting dogs. And, Barnes being where he was, they would find no trail and would gradually sweep to the northward, shortening his journey.

His hopes were verified when he made out a pair of horsemen in the distance and found them to be a part of the posse. They answered his questions concerning Snyder wonderingly, and he dashed away on the new scent. He found Snyder, finally, just before noon, riding with Daniels and one of his deputies, Slim Williams making an inconspic-

uous fourth. Merritt had long since decided against putting the posse upon the right trail in its search for Barnes. Much better to let them blunder about as they were doing, since to find their quarry would be to find also some thirty thousand dollars in which he and North had a very personal interest.

He called Snyder aside, Daniels and his men waiting impatiently. They talked earnestly for a moment, Snyder's cold fury so intense that Merritt blanched before it. Snyder rejoined Daniels shortly and made hurried excuses for his departure.

Slim Williams gazed speculatively at the departing pair and followed in the wake of Daniels and his deputy. "Now, I wonder," he mused, "what brand o' poison Merritt spit into Snyder's ear to make him so plumb venomous lookin' Anyways, that ends my watch over him. They ain't wantin' company, where they're goin'."

Snyder's world was tumbling about his ears. Not all his vituperation against Merritt and North could change the facts or minimize the disaster. O'Brien's interference the night of the hold-up at Junction had been inopportune at best; but his subsequent feat in staging a second hold-up of his own was a catastrophe. And Barnes; except for his timely aid, Merritt and North would have eventually smoked Malone's erstwhile partner out of his lair and recovered the looted payroll. Merritt's description of the fight in the arroyo painted a vivid picture in Snyder's mind. That darting, mad rush across the creek — the guns blazing— If only they had dropped him there!

O'Brien and Barnes joining forces could mean but one thing. Barnes knew now from O'Brien the truth of Powell's killing—had the loot itself as guarantee. Such a situation offered but one course, and Snyder was taking it. He headed for the Border and Mexico. Luckily, he had foreseen the possibility and provided a safe depository below the river for funds. It meant giving up the JC—starting again.

They rode at last into the ranch yard and Snyder disappeared inside the house to make a hasty collection of valuables. Merritt found North at the bunkhouse, his shoulder tightly bandaged and his arm in a sling. Their preparations were soon made. They were waiting beside fresh mounts when Snyder reappeared.

"We're sayin' good-by to all this —permanent, thanks to you two," he growled. "The sooner we cross the river the luckier we'll be. Let's ride."

They made a silent, dour trio as they took the trail south, Snyder leading on the big stallion, Merritt and North riding close behind. At the cut where the little battle had raged earlier in the day, Snyder paused to fling a sneering comment at his companions.

"Two of yuh shootin' and let a man cross down there in broad daylight! Fancy pair o' gunmen you are!"

Merritt grunted unintelligibly. They rode down the slope, crossed the creek and made the steep opposite climb. At its top Snyder reined Diablo back to haunches with a jerk. In the clear light the Circle W lay in plain view in the distance, the lines of buildings wavering slightly in the rising heat waves. A horseman was just leaving the ranch yard

and Snyder's quick exclamation brought his companions alongside.

"That's Barnes, sure as hell!" he exclaimed. "I'd know that big black anywhere. He's alone, and headed for town. By God! I'm bettin' he's left O'Brien and the money there and is going for Mathewson! He wouldn't want t' pack that payroll with him with a posse after him. And there ain't more'n a couple of hands there, besides the girl. Slim Williams is with Daniels. Come on! We'll have a look-see."

So it happened that Rusty had hardly passed out of sight of the Circle W when three other riders turned into the ranch yard and halted beside the front porch. North remained in his saddle while Snyder and Merritt dismounted.

Snyder crossed the veranda swiftly and stepped inside the house. On a chair near the inner door a pair of worn saddle bags lay in plain view and Snyder recognized them instantly. He tiptoed across the room and lifted them, testing their weight.

"Who's there?" From his bed in the inner room O'Brien called huskily.

Rapid footsteps sounded lightly from the rear of the house and Snyder turned as Jacqueline entered. Her face paled suddenly, but her voice was steady when she spoke. "I thought you knew that you weren't welcome here, Mr. Snyder. Less than ever, now."

"Never mind the welcome, sweetheart! This is business. These saddle bags and what's in 'em belongs to me and I'm takin' 'em along. See?"

Before Jacqueline could answer, the sound of voices outside interrupted and a shot rang out. Snyder leaped to the door, his gun drawn.

North sat in his saddle, a leering grin twisting his lips. In his right hand his Colt hung loosely, a thin stream of smoke still clinging to its muzzle.

"That hombre comes out o' the bunkhouse and starts makin' war talk and I let him have it," he said.

A few paces further from the house a man lay sprawled, his body twisted unnaturally. Jack's gasp was faintly audible in the silence. The only defense left to the Circle W was a defense no longer. The man whose grotesque posture there in the sunlight spoke so eloquently of sudden, violent death was her cowboy escort of the morning, Shorty Woods.

Jack turned and ran back through the inner door to where O'Brien lay. Ignoring his feeble question, she stooped over the heap of his clothing and jerked the gunbelt and holster clear. Her quick hands found the heavy weapon and pulled it free.

Snyder's chuckle sounded behind her and she felt his hands upon her —the gun was wrenched away and in a fury of helplessness she fought against his clutch, hating the touch of his hands.

"All right! I ain't wantin' to hold yuh, yuh little cat," he laughed. "Thought you'd get yerself a gun and play heroine a bit, eh?" He whirled her away from him and his heavy hands ripped the flimsy fabric of her dress, her bare shoulder gleaming white for an instant as she fell.

Snyder watched her for a moment, smiling vacantly, his eyes filled with a look that held Jack white and speechless.

"Merritt!" He turned suddenly and barked a command at the man

in the door. "Run down and saddle Miss Jack's hoss. And makes it fast, see? She's goin' too."

Merritt turned without a word and his heavy steps sounded in diminishing echoes as he hastened to obey. Jack straightened slowly, watching Snyder with wide, fear-strained eyes. O'Brien struggled up in a desperate effort to defend her and Snyder sent a hard fist crashing into the man's face. O'Brien fell back.

"I said once I'd take yuh, and by God, I will!" Snyder gloated. "If there's any little thing yuh want to carry along yuh better get it quick." Jack stood motionless and Snyder chuckled again. "But yuh won't need anything, sweetheart. I'll buy yuh all the pretties in Mexico!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE smooth rhythm of Smokey's stride on the hard trail made a soothing background for Rusty's thoughts as they put mile after mile behind them. Luck, that's what it was! Playing a hunch and finding it better than you expected. O'Brien was just the card needed to fill his hand.

In the more broken country nearer Lodestone Rusty left the beaten trail to swing across toward Junction. Mathewson would begin operations there, Jack had said, and Rusty hoped to find him there or intercept him somewhere en route. It was hardly likely that he would find any new clue so long after the hold up and he might return to Lodestone. If so they might meet him on the trail.

Following the contour of the valley whose course approximated his own, Rusty rounded a turn of the hill and pulled up sharply to avoid collision with a tight-packed group of horsemen riding from the opposite direction. It was Sheriff Daniels' posse, as Rusty guessed instantly.

The posse had re-formed after their unsuccessful combing of the flatlands to the south and were moving now toward more lucrative hunting grounds. They halted quickly as they recognized their quarry almost among them.

"Throw up yer hands, Barnes! We gotcha!" Daniels shouted.

"Sure." Rusty obligingly lifted his hands and waited their approach. "Only now you've got me I reckon you'll be chasin' off after some other parties entirely! You see, I've recovered th' payroll stolen at Junction, and I can prove who took it and who killed Powell."

A chorus of derisive remarks answered him and he spoke to Daniels directly, in sharp, terse explanation. When he had done, Daniels shook his head dubiously.

"It won't do, Barnes. It's a plain case against yuh—both at Junction and at Juarez. We're takin' you in."

"Malone did the Juarez job. You'll find his horse, a big black, same as mine—at th' JC, I reckon. His money circulated in a poker game and that's how I got the marked bill."

Before Daniels could speak a half dozen miners crowded forward and around Rusty, one of them waving a coiled rope. "Come on, boys! Let's string him up! No use takin' him t' jail!"

Like a wild pack eager for the kill the posse surged forward. Given leadership, any crowd can become a bloodthirsty mob and the man

with the rope provided the vicious leadership and the vocal urge.

Rusty's attitude of tolerant explanation changed instantly. The law he was prepared to meet and satisfy; but this was not the law. It was murder running in pack. Daniels' indecision made his leadership nominal and he made no attempt to check his men. Rusty lifted Smokey on the bit and swung him about—dropped low over the saddle horn as a gun barked and heard the song of the bullet over his head.

As Smokey leaped into stride Rusty heard a shrill yell behind him: "Don't shoot! I'll get him!" He glanced back; saw Slim Williams spur ahead of the mob and come thundering in Smokey's wake, sitting high in the saddle, his six-shooter blazing. Rusty noticed with a sigh of relief that Slim's aim was high by a good margin. It was a neat ruse to cover his flight and Rusty grinned appreciatively. The posse dared not open fire for fear of hitting Slim, and his noisy pursuit effectively blanketed Rusty's flight.

Smokey was stretched now in full stride and as they made the turn that gave them temporary cover of the slope Rusty turned him to the right and toward the rim of the valley . They reached it just as the pursuit swept into view below and their scattered fire sang harmlessly overhead as the big black dropped behind the ridge.

It was a hopeless chase now with the black horse out of gunshot before his pursuers cleared the hill, his long stride taking him further away at every jump. The posse gave up the immediate chase in favor of the longer one of wearing down their quarry, and Rusty straightened away again toward Junction.

Each rise in the rolling lands he traveled showed the posse rapidly losing ground and Rusty pulled down to a less killing pace. Still the miles slipped by rapidly and long before he sighted his destination Daniels and his men were hopelessly distanced and out of sight.

Within sight of the town he met Mathewson, just leaving it. The four Circle W riders comprising his posse offered a striking contrast both in numbers and vehemence to the posse Rusty had just encountered.

Mathewson's hearty greeting was not without its equally hearty protest against the danger of Rusty's position, and once more the younger man repeated the story of his meeting with O'Brien and the fight in the gulch.

"Daniels and that pack of wolves he calls a posse are still trailin' me, so let's swing wide and let 'em pass. You all come with me to th' Circle W, take charge of that sack of money, and get O'Brien's story. Then we'll round up Snyder and get it all settled while Daniels is chasin' his tail around the hills."

Accordingly they rode far wide of the trail Rusty had set and let Daniels' posse solve as best they could the problem of the trail they left.

It was nearly dusk when they approached the Circle W and Rusty wondered at the dark, deserted aspect of the ranch house. He glanced at Mathewson and saw from the sheriff's fixed gaze that he, too, found a strangeness in the air. Neither man made any comment and they rode in silence, urging their horses a bit.

Rusty was first to sight the body lying there in the yard. Mathewson saw it, too, and his exclamation was

a curse. One of the cowboys ran up and turned the body over.

"It's Shorty! And dead as hell!"

Rusty was already out of the saddle and he crossed the porch at a leap, his gun naked in his hand.

"Jack! Jack, honey—where are you?" His voice echoed hollowly in the empty house.

"Snyder—him and Merritt and North come just after yuh left." O'Brien's voice was weak, but he spoke rapidly. "Shot somebody out there—knocked me on th' jaw, and when I come to they was gone. They took the girl, I reckon. I heard Snyder say he was takin' her along to Mexico. 'Course he took the payroll."

Rusty was halfway to the door when Mathewson stopped him. "He'll head for Indian Spring, lad, on the west trail. Wait until we get fresh horses and we'll go after him."

"Wait hell! Smokey'll take me. I'm goin', Dan. He's got Jack!"

He vaulted to the saddle without touching foot to stirrup and Smokey was running when he settled into his seat. "Come on, boy! Run, big horse—"

The slow return from Junction had been a breathing space and Smokey was comparatively fresh again. Bred of generations of sturdy stock trained and picked for speed, he would run to the last ounce of endurance and his mighty muscles bunched and rippled in the smooth flow of his stride. Rusty rode low over his withers, weight carefully distributed, giving the horse every advantage that skilled riding could give.

They swooped into a valley and took the opposite slope with a rush. Again the rapid drum of Smokey's feet on packed turf. Mile after mile and still the big black held the smooth, effortless rhythm.

Far to the south a plainly marked trail lay before them and Smokey took it, his hoofbeats changing in tone but not in cadence as they fell on the firmer ground.

Darkness had settled like a pall and now a few stars appeared to add a ghostly pallor to the night. A faint glow in the east heralded a new moon and Rusty watched it rise and climb up beyond the line of the horizon. He checked the black, held him to a gentler pace for a mile or more and then gave him his head again.

The miles seemed endless. Rusty fought the mad impatience that throbbed in his brain with saner judgment. Barring accident Snyder could not reach Indian Spring far ahead of him. His lead was great, but, feeling secure against immediate pursuit, he would set no such pace as Rusty was making. They would stop at the spring for water; possibly for food as well. After that with but a short ride between him and the Rio Grande, Snyder would feel safe. Even if he were too late to catch them at the Spring Rusty believed he could still hope to cover them before they reached the river.

The level prairie land gave way to rolling country again, and then came rough, broken stretches of jagged cuts and ridges. Smokey was laboring now and Rusty eased him through the grades, speaking now and again in low throaty tones.

Topping a steep rise, Rusty caught a faint, rosy glow ahead that could be but one thing: a campfire, and Indian Spring! Snyder was confident, indeed, and had called a halt for food and an hour's rest before the last stretch across the Border.

He might need fresh, rested mounts there, certainly.

Rusty crossed the reins over Smokey's neck and pulled his gun; turned the cylinder tentatively. The trail followed a valley now and Smokey's feet made hardly a sound on its sandy floor.

Just ahead the glow of the fire etched the turn of the valley and Smokey sprang ahead again as Rusty's knees tightened. They came into the spring basin at a run—crossed the space to the fire in seconds.

"Look out! It's Barnes!"

Merritt's shrill shout brought Snyder and North to their feet. Rusty was out of the saddle as the big black plowed to a halt and faced them across the circle of firelight.

"You're under arrest, Snyder! All o' yuh!"

"Like hell!"

Merritt's curse and the lightning movement of his hand were simultaneous. North swung his hand for his gun. Rusty's forty-five roared and crashed again, in cadence with Merritt's fire. North reeled and fell—lifted his gun again. Rusty's second shot had scored. Snyder's lone figure on the other side of the fire was crouched slightly. Rusty's gun flamed again, and North's gun hand dropped.

The crash of Snyder's gun from the left sent a stab of fire across Rusty's side. He whirled as Snyder raised his gun again. "This is the end, Snyder!" The two reports blended.

Rusty swayed slightly, watching Snyder's knees sag and bend, the

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body crumpling forward. "Jack?" Rusty's left hand lifted, gropingly —brushed his brow. "Jack!"

From somewhere very distant a voice answered him and he sank into comfortable darkness with the feel of soft arms about him.

When Mathewson and three of the Circle W boys rode in an hour or so later, Rusty sat propped against a white-faced girl whose wan smile was evidence of little else than indomitable will. The sheriff took in at a glance the mute evidences of the battle.

"Looks like yuh made a clean sweep, lad. Yuh hurt bad?"

"No, Dan. Not hurt so bad. There is somethin' bad the matter with my heart, though." The old boyish smile flashed brightly now, and some of the color returned to Jack's cheeks before it. "I'm afraid I'll never get over it, sweetheart." He turned in her arms so that her face was very near—so near that he caught her whispered answer:

"Please don't, ever, Rusty."

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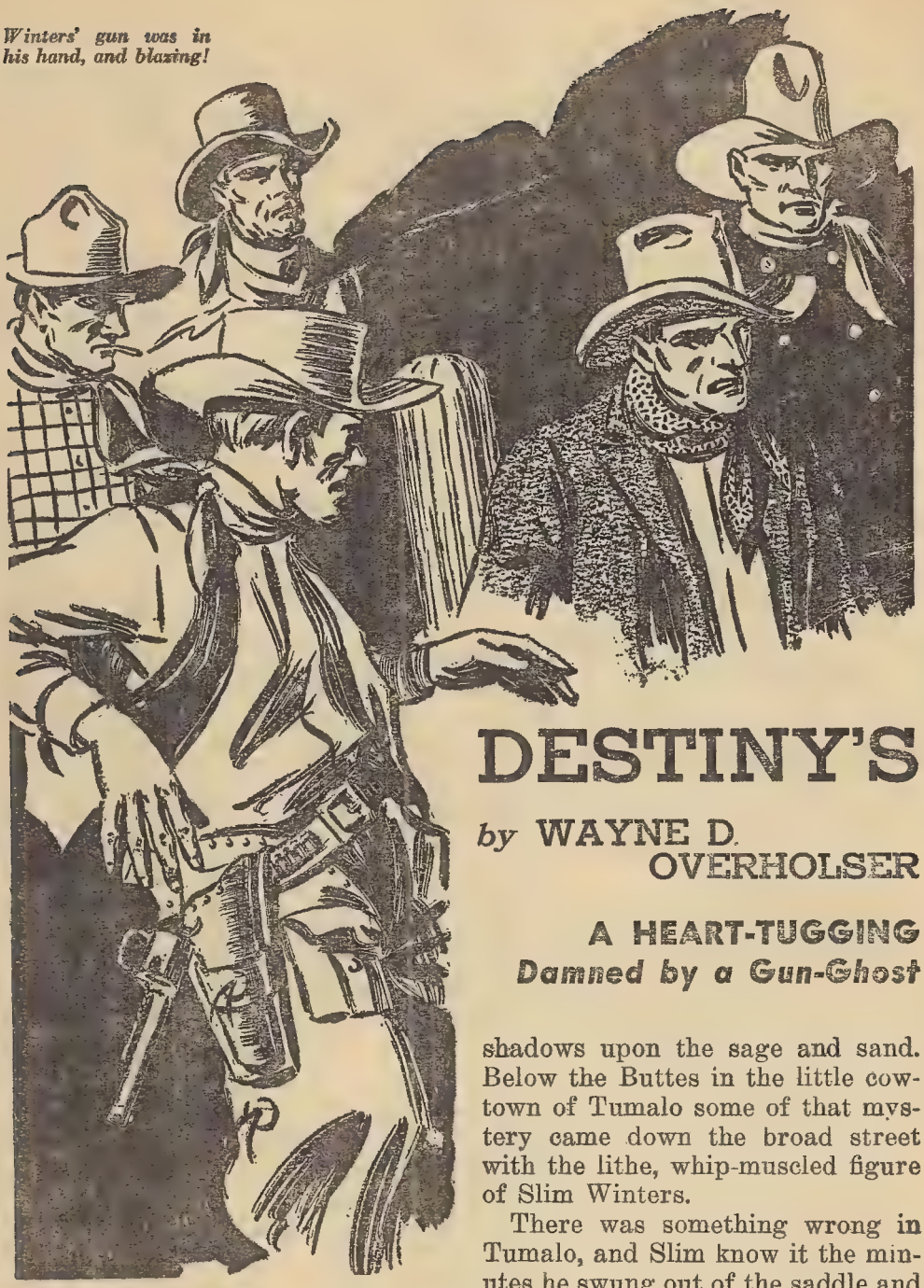
Winters' gun was in his hand, and blazing!



DESTINY'S

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

A HEART-TUGGING
Damned by a Gun-Ghost

THE deep, mysterious purple of evening was upon the Smoky Buttes, hiding the green and red, throwing their long, dark shadows upon the sage and sand. Below the Buttes in the little cow-town of Tumalo some of that mystery came down the broad street with the lithe, whip-muscled figure of Slim Winters.

There was something wrong in Tumalo, and Slim know it the minutes he swung out of the saddle and hitched his chestnut to the rack. A half dozen men were standing stiffly on the porch of Cassidy's Bar watching the drama that was being enacted at the other end of the

BACK TRAIL

STORY OF A LAWMAN
From His Owlhoot Past!

hitching pole. For a second Slim felt the dozen eyes on him. He was black garbed. Not even his bandanna or gun buts added a touch of color. His face was lean, with only the deep blue of his eyes to break the bronze. His eyes that glittered now as he turned and surveyed the scene.

It was this that had warned Slim that things were wrong here. He hadn't had time to size it up before,

To erase his owlhoot past, Slim Winters sided the Tumalo sheriff . . . but he could not erase the gun-ghost who knew that Slim was worth $1,000—dead!

but it was a feeling that years of riding the back trail had developed, a feeling that more than once had saved his life, and sometimes, as now, caused him to risk his life in troubles that were not his own.

Three hard faced rannies were standing in the street, all double gunned. Facing them from the sidewalk stood another man, a star on his shirt front. Death was in the air. Slim sensed it, just as he sensed the indifference of the men on the saloon porch. He felt a glow of admiration for the lawman. Used as he was to reading men, he knew the star toter had no chance against the three hard cases, and the lawman knew it, but the granite set of his jaw showed there'd be no backing down.

THEN a grim smile set Slim's thin lips. He was going to deal himself in for no reason at all except that he liked the star packer's guts.

"I don't know you gents," the lawman was saying, "maybe you are just riding through. Them two broncs," he nodded toward a paint and a sorrel that were tied to the hitching rack, "are common enough in this country, and I don't know their brands. Maybe they are yours, but that black," Slim's eyes followed his gesture to the third horse, a magnificent, deep chested animal, "is Deep Black, and I know damned well he ain't yours. He's Pete Caster's, and Pete wouldn't sell him to nobody."

"I never heard of Deep Night or Pete Caster," the man on the left said, "and I'm getting damned tired of telling you he's mine. I rode him down from Wyoming."

"Where's your bill of sale if he's yours?" the lawman snapped.

"I ain't got a bill of sale," the other growled, "I raised that black from a colt in Wyoming, and if you don't want some lead poisoning, you'd better mosey on while me and my pards get a drink."

"Sure," the lawman said, "come ahead and get your drink, but you're staying in town till I hear from Pete whether he's lost any horses or not."

"We ain't staying in this town any longer than it'll take us to cut the dust out of our throats."

"Then I'd better arrest you till I hear from Pete," and the star toter took one step forward.

Slim knew with the taking of one more step death would come with the accompaniment of blasting gunfire.

"In case you gents are interested," Slim's voice crackled like a sudden electric spark, "I'm siding the sheriff."

For the first time their eyes turned to him, eyes that held a second on his black butted guns, hung low and tightly thonged. Then their gaze was on his face, and rightly they read what it held, that mortal life is but a brief thing for those who live by the gun, that the things of life worth fighting for are few, but this was one.

Inside Slim Winters was a queer tight feeling. Tomorrow, if he were alive, he would laugh at himself for siding a pinion of the law because he was outside the law. Yet he, better than any of the others, knew the necessity of preserving the rules that regulated human society.

"You're kinda sticking your nose into a business that ain't yours, mister," the man on the left said.

"That's just what I am doing, hombre."

Then the sheriff took his second step. There was a glitter in the eyes of the man on the left, and Slim knew it was coming. As if by some prearranged signal, all three clawed for their guns. It was an old scene to Winters, a scene in which he had been an actor too often. Violence, death, then the silence of long trails with only the ghosts for company of the men who'd died before his black butted guns. It would not have been pleasant company even if they were alive, for the towns that buried them were made better towns by their passing.

Winters' guns were in his hands and blazing, although those on the saloon porch would have sworn they saw no motion. Two of the three were down before the sheriff got into action. The feet of the man on the left skidded out from under him, and he sat down in the dust of the street, his eyes staring blankly before him, then he toppled back. The second came walking straight into the smoke of the blasting guns, his head thrown back in a queer, stricken way, then he, too, sagged, and sprawled face down.

The third man had his hand filled now and was throwing lead at Slim. One slug screamed past his ear, another tore through his shirt sleeve and lay open the flesh. Then the lawman's Colt roared, and the killer dropped his gun, his arm broken by a bullet from the sheriff's .45.

SLIM swung his still smoking guns upon the men on the porch.

"Any of you gents friends of these hombres?"

"Hell no," one of them shouted, "Quarter Circle 10 men don't horn into somebody else's fight." They wheeled and went inside.

"It's all right, stranger," the sheriff said, and prodded the remaining man with his gun, "start walking. Come on down to the jail," he said over his shoulder to Slim, "I want to thank you right."

Winters ejected the empties from his guns, and thumbed new loads into place. He swung aboard his chestnut and rode the two blocks to the jail. He was waiting when the sheriff got there with his prisoner. Funny to be waiting in a sheriff's office. He stared at the reward dodgers on the wall, the tight smile on his lips again. Not that he expected to see his own face on the wall. Miles City was too far away.

A sawbones came in, dressed the wounded man's arm, and left. Then the sheriff stood before Slim, his hand outstretched.

"Name's Ed Cole," he said, "and right now I can't remember ever being so glad to meet up with anybody."

Slim took the lawman's hand and grinned, the tightness gone now.

"My brand's Winters," he said, "Slim, they call me."

"Yes sir," Cole went on, "it was plumb lucky for me you decided to horn in. Them hombres were plenty mean, but hell, they never had a chance. You're sure lightning with them hoglegs, Slim."

"I get along," Winters studied the lawman. He was older than Slim, probably pushing thirty, brown-eyed and big-mouthed with lips that grinned easily. "What was the ruckus about, Ed?"

"I saw 'em ride by and I recognized that black. Pete'll sure be glad to get him back. He's got a horse ranch in the northern part of

the state. Just happens that I know him and I've seen that horse too many times to be fooled. Then when I started questioning them, they got proddy, so I knew something was wrong. Pete wouldn't put a brand on that black. Didn't want to mar him up. Figured on making a race horse out of him. I reckon these jiggers just picked him up as they went by."

"Funny they'd come riding through with a stolen horse," Slim mused.

"Tumalo's kinda out of the way," Cole said, his eyes on Slim. "Pete's ranch is a long ways off, too." He paused. Even in the light that was thin now with the sun half hidden behind Smoky Buttes, he saw that Winters' clothes were old and worn. Even his boots were badly scuffed and the heels worn down. "Just passing through, if it's any of my business?"

"Yeah," Slim nodded, "and I guess it's time I was moseying on."

"If you ain't headed nowhere in particular, how'd you like to take on the job of being my deputy. I could sure use a gent that handles guns the way you do."

A grin creased Slim's face. That would be good, him packing a star. Then the grin faded. Suddenly Slim Winters knew he was damned tired of running. Right now he was broke, and hungry as hell. It wouldn't be bad, staying awhile and eating regular. Besides, the sheriff had been right when he said Tumalo was out of the way. He'd be safe here, if he was anywhere.

"You don't know much about me, Ed."

"I'd take a chance on any man that'd do what you just did. The pay's better'n nursing beef, but, of course, Tumalo ain't no Sunday School town. There was a killing this morning. A Quarter Circle 10 man beefed a puncher named Burris. I've got him back here now." He nodded toward the cells. "That's why they were in town. I'll have trouble with 'em, trying to get that damned Biff out of jail."

Slim was thinking Miles City was a long ways off. Why should a man's past dog him forever? He'd made it up a dozen times, just as he had today. He had it coming, the right to settle down and make something of himself.

"All right, Ed," he said quietly, "I'll just take that job."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Cole dug into a littered desk drawer, and came out with a nickel plated star. "There you are, Herndon County's assistant pillar of the law. Put your bronc away and come over to the restaurant."

Slim turned his chestnut over to the liveryman, gave instructions for his care, and joined Cole in the restaurant.

"Lost my deputy 'bout a month ago," the sheriff said between mouthfuls, "got salivated when he horned in on a stage hold-up. Guess I just been waiting for the right man to come along. You'll earn your pay all right, Slim. Seems like there's been a hell of a lot of trouble lately."

"Like today?"

"No. A lawman can expect things like that, and like the Burris killing. I'm talking about stage hold ups, big scale cattle rustling, and the like. Looks as if some experts have moved in and are operating out of the Smoky Buttes. Maybe these jiggers that cashed in were coming to join up. They looked like owl hooters to

me. I've looked around, but hell, it'd take an army to comb them brakes."

SUDDENLY Slim's food didn't taste good. Again the clutching fingers of an ever present past. In the few minutes it took to finish the meal, he lived again the years he'd followed the dark trails, always riding away from the thing that was behind. He couldn't settle down with honest men, he wouldn't throw in with owl hooters. Yet his path had crossed with many of the abandoned brotherhood. There were those who knew about Miles City and the $1,000 Montana thought he was worth. Now Slim knew, as sure as he sat here over the first square meal he'd had in two days, that someday a man would ride into Tumalo who knew him. Maybe tomorrow, maybe a month from now, but someday it would happen.

Then they were outside on the sidewalk with the blue sky overhead. A breeze cooled Slim's cheeks, a breeze that bore with it the smell of the sage. It was almost dark now with only a trace of the sun's crimson above Smoky Buttes, and the twilight hid, for a time, the shabbiness of the town. It seemed to hide, too, his own past. His jaw set. This was as good a time as any to stop, as good a place. When it caught up, well, he'd face it, and if it meant going back to Miles City, he'd go. He was done running.

"Let's walk around a spell," Cole said, "and get some fresh air. We may be burning powdersmoke again afore morning if we keep Biff in the jug."

Aimlessly they clattered over loose boarded sidewalks, and walked through weeds over dirt paths. Suddenly Cole stopped.

"Evening, Jean," he said, and took off his Stetson.

Slim was aware now that they were on a walk with the boards nailed down solidly, that they were standing beside a picket fence painted white. Inside was a cottage, as trim and neat as the fence or the poplars that shaded the house. Honeysuckles climbed over the porch, green and pleasant.

"Good evening, Ed," he heard the girl's voice, "come in."

They opened the gate and walked up the path.

"Meet my new deputy, Jean, Slim Winters," Cole said. "Slim, this is Miss Weston."

The girl stood up and extended her hand.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Winters. I've been telling Ed he ought to get a deputy."

Slim didn't say anything for a time. He held her hand until she drew it away, and looked at her as if he'd seen something he'd never expected to see in Tumalo. She was taller than average, and shapely, and even in the twilight he caught the luster in her eyes, the understanding in her face. It seemed as if he'd found the thing he'd long sought, as if destiny had shaped his path and caused him to take a hand in the affair in Cassidy's Bar.

"Well, Slim," Cole said, "can't you say anything?"

Slim felt the red burn his cheeks under the tan.

"I guess I'm kinda staggered, seeing anybody like this in Tumalo."

The girl laughed.

"Sit down," she said.

"Even Tumalo has its points, Slim," Cole grinned.

They sat down. Slim built a cigarette and smoked while they talked. It was good just to sit with friends.

Presently Cole got up.

"We'd better be getting back, Slim. So long, Jean."

"Come again, both of you."

"Sure will," Cole said, "it's a good place to come, Slim, when you get tired of the jayhoos down there in the callaboose."

When they were back on the sidewalk, Slim said. "A fine girl."

"They don't come any better," Cole answered.

"I guess you're lucky, Ed."

"Not me," he laughed shortly, and let it go at that.

Later, when they got to the jail, Cole said, "Tomorrow, you better get a room in the hotel. Tonight we'll just stay here. I expect company, long 'bout dawn."

IT WAS before dawn that they came, a half dozen of them, riding closely, a black knot under the part of a moon that lay in the west. They dismounted in the street and came toward the jail, no noise, no bluster, just the sure, certain movements of men who know what they are about.

Cole and Slim stepped out together, both with their hands filled, hammers back.

"Hold it, you," Cole said it as calmly as if he were discussing the weather.

"We're getting Biff," the man in front said, "and we don't want to hurt you, Ed."

"Biff'll wait trial, Grady. You know he'll get a fair and square one."

"No Quarter Circle 10 man's gonna stand trial. Git out of the way, Ed."

Then Slim spoke, and there was something about his tone that stopped Grady where he stood. "There's twelve good shells in these hoglegs, boys. Don't anybody think I'm gonna miss."

They moved back. Even in the yellow light of the moon, they recognized him as a sinister figure, black-garbed and somber. Hard-riding, lead-slinging rannies that they were, they had no stomach to face four guns, held in granite sure fingers.

"Better let the law take it's course, Grady," Cole said.

"Git on your broncs and slope out of here," Slim grated. He gestured with one gun. "You'll git it first, Grady."

As if propelled by some force beyond their own control, they swung back into leather, dug in their spurs, and thundered out of town.

"I'll be teetotally damned," Cole thrust his guns into their holsters. "You've got something of the devil in you, Slim. I never saw Sam Grady or any of his outfit back water before. Reckon they knew you was the gent that sided me there in front of Cassidy's Bar."

"Maybe so. What kind of an outfit is this Quarter Circle 10? Maybe they're the ones doing this robbing around."

"Not them," Cole shook his head. "Old man Wilkins owns the spread, and he's one of the big guns of the county. They've been here for years, and we've only had this lawlessness for a couple of months. Let's take a snooze. Reckon the fireworks is over."

So Slim Winters took a room in

the hotel, ate his meals regularly for the first time in months, and settled into the life of Tumalo. It was three days after the ruckus in Cassidy's Bar that he was crossing the street to the jail and heard a high pitched voice shout. "You don't need to hire a stranger for a deputy, Ed. There's plenty of young fellers here in Herndon County that'd make you a good one. Hell, that gun toting killer's probably got a record as long as your arm."

"Then Slim heard Cole say mildly, "Mr. Wilkins, there ain't nobody in Herndon County that coulda done what Slim's already done. Long as I'm sheriff, I'll do my own deputy picking."

"Don't forget I'm one of the county commissioners, Ed, and don't ever think I won't call a meeting of the county court. We'll see who does the deputy picking, by—"

He whirled as Slim stepped into the open doorway and his shadow fell across the room. There were three men besides Cole. Two of them Slim knew, Jud Rush, a little, baldheaded jasper who owned the hotel and the biggest store in town, Abe Gaskins the banker, stoop-shouldered and hook-nosed, looking the part of the money grubbing vulture that he was, and a third man who must be the owner of the Quarter Circle 10.

"Sounds like you're talking 'bout me, gents," Slim said calmly. "If it's a matter of Ed losing his star, reckon I'll just drift on, easy like."

"That'd be a plumb good thing to do," Wilkins raged.

For long seconds Slim stood looking at Wilkins. He was a man over sixty, gray haired and wearing an equally gray mustache that covered the most of his thin-lipped mouth. His hazel eyes, unfaded by age, met Slim's gaze squarely.

"You're 'bout what I expected to see, Wilkins," Slim spat the words, "not much of a man. Maybe you're peaceful and law abiding, but you ain't man enough to run herd on that gun-toting bunch of varmints you got on your payroll."

Wilkins stuttered in speechless rage, and Slim grinned as he felt the tension of the others. Wilkins had probably never been talked to like this before.

Then Rush, who had the appearance of a timid man, said, "Maybe we need a gunslick to help out the sheriff, Sam."

SUDDENLY Wilkins' rage vanished, and a grin lighted his craggy face. "You might be right, Jud," he said to the store man, and to Slim, "and you might be right 'bout my boys. Guess they have been kinda high and mighty."

"Hold on," Gaskins, the banker, broke in, "don't forget we came in here to tell Cole to fire this killer."

"We'll give him a try, Abe," Wilkins wheeled and stalked out, Rush behind him. Gaskins hesitated a second, his cold eyes on Slim, then he followed.

Cole sat down and scratched his head.

"Slim," he said weakly, "I don't know how you do it. Nobody ever dressed old Wilkins down like that before, and made him like it."

"It's the way you hold your mouth, Ed," Slim grinned. Then he sobered. "From what you've told me, I'll bet my bottom dollar some of them big guns are behind this trouble you been having."

Cole nodded. "I been thinking

some of the same. He'll tip his hand, who ever it is."

For some reason Herndon County quieted down. The stages came through untouched, and Tumalo slumbered as peacefully as a cow town could. The Quarter Circle 10 rider Biff was tried, and freed, those who saw the shooting swore that it had been done in self defense.

So the summer wore along, and Slim, ever mindful of the shadows that dogged his path, watched every stranger who rode into Tumalo, but none were men he knew. He was being watched, of that he was sure, and the sultry quiet brought him no relief. The explosion would come, and he felt, somehow, it would be interwoven into his own past. The wise thing to do would be saddle up his chestnut, and ride away, but there were ties that held him in Tumalo, ties that centered around the blond-gold head of the girl he'd met that first night.

He saw Jean Weston nearly every day, sometimes in Rush's store where she clerked, sometimes in the evenings at her home. Occasionally he dropped around with Cole, usually alone. Often they would just sit quietly in the twilight, Slim smoking, Jean sewing until it became too dark.

Once, with his eyes on the purple of the Smoky Buttes, he said, "I wonder if a man ever gets away from his past. Far enough away that he can settle down and marry, and live the life he wants to live."

"If he stays and meets that past, he can. Not by running away."

"And the woman?" Slim asked.

"If she loves him," she answered. "Nothing else matters."

That was all, yet they both understood. So Slim waited for his past to catch up. Sometimes he hoped, the slim figure of the girl the center of that hope. Then it would die, weighed down by the emptiness of these years he'd followed the dark trails. It came, the thing he'd feared, in the figure of Poker Face Allen.

It was one night in fall, just as the valley round ups were about over. He was standing at the bar in Cassidy's when a shadow fell across the mahogany. He turned and saw Allen.

"It's been a long time, Slim," the outlaw said, "a long time since you broke jail and high tailed it out of Miles City with a posse behind you. I kinda thought I oughtta see this new deputy that's so fast with his guns."

There was no expression on Allen's face except a pleased glint in his eyes as if he'd found a sure thing, and knew how to make it pay.

"Yes, it has been a long time," Slim nodded. He opened the top of his tobacco sack and shook the last of the grown grains into the paper in his other hand. Bitterness showed on his thin lips as he looked at the empty sack. Its usefulness was gone, and so was his in Tumalo. With it the smashing of a dream. He'd wanted his past to catch up. Now he wished like hell it hadn't.

"There's a lot of folks in Tumalo that'd like to know about Miles City."

"I know," Slim nodded, and touched the flame of a match to his cigarette.

"You can't live on this side of the road," Allen went on. "Why don't you get some sense into your head?"

Slim looked at the red end of his cigarette, and seemed to be con-

sidering. Then he asked, "What do I do?"

"Now you're smart," the outlaw nodded. "We been laying low, waiting for this. A lot of gold came in on the stage tonight for the roundup payrolls. They had an army guarding it, so we couldn't touch the stage, but tomorrow morning about eight a gent's coming in from the Bar L to get their payroll. Gaskins opens up the safe, and we step in. You're to see that Cole ain't there to guard it. Then you can ride away with us and get your split."

"Sounds easy. How do you know all this?"

"We got a pard that knows all about the business of Tumalo, and don't get any ideas about gabbing 'cause this said pard knows about Miles City, too."

"My mouth shuts easy," Slim said, and went out.

THIS was what a man got for stopping and dreaming, and yet he wasn't sorry. The dream had been worth it, and somehow the hope wouldn't die, for hope is a stubborn thing. He still had time to ride away, but that thought didn't stay. Now that the thing was here, his path was plain to read.

He found Cole in his office.

"I hear there's a lot of gold in the bank tonight, Ed," he said.

"Yeah," the sheriff spun around in his chair. "I was gonna tell you about that. Reckon one of us oughtta stick around the bank tonight, and the other one tomorrow till most of it's gone out to the ranches. Which do you want?"

"I like my sleep at night," Slim said. "I'll come in 'bout seven."

"Suits me," Cole nodded.

"Ed, there's something you ought to know," Slim didn't meet Cole's eyes, "when I was a kid, I got into a shooting scrape in Miles City, killed a man over a card game. He drew first, but he had a pard who swore he didn't. I figured that gent's testimony would hang me, so I broke jail and I've been riding the back trails ever since until I sloped in here. They've got a reward out for me. Reckon you might as well have it, Ed."

Cole didn't speak for a time. He sat looking at Slim. Finally he said, "I don't want that reward, and maybe I'm forgetting my job, but there's a clear trail to the border from here."

Slim shook his head. "You can't do that, Ed. I'm just going to ask one thing. Let me wear this star till tomorrow night."

"Sure. You can wear that star as long as I'm sheriff."

"No, just till tomorrow night."

Outside a night breeze was blowing down from the Smoky Buttes, bearing with it the incense of the desert. Tonight Slim didn't want to see Jean. Maybe tomorrow she wouldn't want to see him. He climbed the stairs to his hotel room and for a long time sat at the window looking up at the star twinkling sky. There was something there he had never seen before, strength and beauty. Then he went to bed, but not to sleep.

At seven he found Cole in the alley beside the bank, sleepy eyed and stiff with stubble darkening his face.

"Peaceful as a sleeping babe," he grinned, "and I'm ready to do some snoozing myself."

For an hour Slim waited in the alley, pacing back and forth from front to rear. Presently the banker Gaskins came by and opened up,

unaware that Slim was in the alley. Slim's face hardened with the certainty in his mind that Gaskins was the 'pard' Allen had mentioned.

The Bar L rider galloped by and pulled up in front of the bank. As if that were the signal, three men rode out of an alley in the next block, casually stopped, and two of them came in, Allen and another with the hard print of the owlhoot on his face. Then Slim palmed his guns, left the alley and stepped into the bank. The man with the horses yelled a warning, and clawed for his gun.

"It's no go," Slim roared, and moved away from the open door. "Drop your guns."

Allen swiveled. "You damned fool," he bellowed, and a string of oaths was lost in the crash of gunfire as the man beside him opened up.

Then Slim dropped hammer, and the bank building rocked with the smashing explosions of .45's. Slugs ploughed into the wall behind him, smoke rolled in blue clouds across the room, shrouding the outlaws in its shadowy pall. Both were firing at him, yet Slim saw the Bar L man fall.

The second man was down on his face, blood jutting from his chest, drenching the floor with its crimson flow. Allen came walking through the smoke, stiffly, his head back, but his gun kept throwing lead, its muzzle spitting flame into the smoke haze.

A slug-blow in Slim's shoulder threw him back against the wall, then Allen stopped, staggered, and spilled to the floor. Slim had a vague feeling he heard gunfire in the street. There was another Colt blast, and a bullet drilled into his thigh. He went down and through a teller's window he glimpsed Gaskins' fury laden face. With an arm that seemed suddenly tired, Slim raised his gun and from where he lay on the floor, triggered it once more as Gaskins was pronging back the hammer again. The jump of the gun tore it loose from limp fingers, and Slim's face dropped to the floor as all sound faded into nothingness.

THERE was no roar of guns to break the quiet when Slim opened his eyes and looked into the faces of Jean Weston and Ed Cole.

"You sure wound that business up," Cole's face was split in a wide

(Continued on page 122)

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Now a new invention permits you to make a professional-like recording of your own singing, talking or instrument playing. Without experience you can quickly make phonographic records which we furnish and immediately play them and listen to them yourself. Record friend's voices, instrument playing, orchestras or your favorite radio broadcast entertainment right off the air and hear it as often as you like.

Test Your Voice At Home!

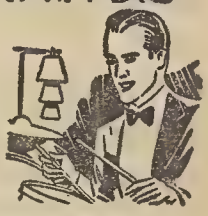
Before spending money for an audition, make a "home record" of your voice or musical instrument and mail it to a reliable agency . . . you might be one of the lucky ones to find fame and success thru this easy method of bringing your talents before the proper authorities.

IT'S LOTS OF FUN TOO! HAVE RECORDING PARTIES!

You'll get a real thrill out of HOME RECORDING. Surprise your friends by letting them hear your voice or playing right from a record. Record a snappy talking feature. Record jokes and become the life of the party. Great to help train your voice and to cultivate speech. Nothing to practice . . . you start recording at once . . . no other mechanical or electrical devices needed . . . everything necessary included. Nothing else to buy. Just sing, speak or play and HOME RECORDO unit which operates on any electric or old type phonograph will do the recording on special blank records we furnish. You can immediately play the records back as often as you wish. Make your home movie a talking picture with HOME RECORDO. Simply make the record while filming and play back while showing the picture.

COMPLETE OUTFIT INCLUDING 6 TWO SIDED BLANK RECORDS ONLY **$2.98**

Everything is included. Nothing else to buy and nothing else to pay. You get complete HOME RECORDING UNIT which includes special recording needle, playing needles. 6 two sided unbreakable records. Also guide record and spiral feeding attachment and combination recording and playback unit suitable for recording a skit, voice, instrument or radio broadcast. ADDITIONAL 2 SIDED BLANK RECORDS COST ONLY $.75 per dozen.



SEND NO MONEY! HURRY COUPON! START RECORDING AT ONCE!

HOME RECORDING CO.,
Studio D.A., 130 West 17th St.,
New York, N. Y.

Send entire HOME RECORDING OUTFIT (including 6 two-sided records) described above, by return mail. I will pay postman $2.98, plus postage, on arrival. (Send cash or money order now for $3.00 and save postage.)

Send ..... additional blank records at 75c per dozen.

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TYPE OF PHONOGRAPH
OR RECORD PLAYER .....

Note: Canadian and Foreign $3.00 cash with order.

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PHONOGRAPHS and PORTABLES

HOME RECORDING CO. Studio D. A.
130 West 17th Street, New York, N. Y.

How Scientific Scalp Treatments ENCOURAGE HAIR GROWTH

1 You, who are worried because of excessive falling hair and approaching baldness, will be interested in the story on this page which is published through the courtesy of the Vitex Hair Institute, 521 Fifth Avenue, New York. You will find pictures showing how subjects are treated to encourage hair growth.

3 Once the cause is determined and belief that treatment will help, the scalp is peeled—a cutaneous layer is painlessly removed. This peeling effects a clean, healthy condition absent of unwanted, clogged conditions, so the hair can breathe and function naturally without interruption.

4 Next comes a whirl with the high frequency ray machine that stimulates the follicles and pituitary gland. Exercise for the scalp is just as necessary as exercise for any other part of the body. Regular normal circulation should be maintained for a healthy condition.

2 A microscopic examination of your scalp would probably reveal that there are foreign agents attacking and clogging up hair growing areas and interfering with natural hair growth.

In many cases science and chemistry has been able to correct this condition by encouraging increased circulation.

5 Then comes a hand vacuum that lifts and relaxes the scalp and hair roots.

6 Our patient becomes marvelously relaxed as he feels the surge of nourishing fluid in the network of blood vessels.

7 The treatment continues with intermittent vacuum and massage to activate the nerve system and loosen up lazy circulation. Many dermatologists agree that in many cases increased circulation is most helpful because it is scientifically acknowledged that stagnation makes it improbable that proper and sufficient nourishment is being supplied to the hair for natural growth.

8 Here you see a trained scalp expert applying VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER. An intermittent vacuum and massage is also used to induce increased circulation so necessary for the hair roots. Cleanliness is a necessary requisite for uninterrupted hair growth. Vitex's Conditioner contains precious ingredients that clean, stimulate and help purify . . . It is amazing how much dirt can settle in the hair and scalp and clog up the pores.

9 Here's a laboratory photo of Vitex Hair Institute's chemist concocting the precious ingredients which are used in VITEX'S Hair Reconditioning Method. Those who appreciate the social and business value of a healthy head of hair, should know there are fourteen local causes of baldness . . . thirty years experimenting, study of research and application have now made it possible to present readers of this magazine with a scientific aid that has proven itself to be very helpful.

10 Now the subject feels the tingling effect of chemistry used and knows that VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER is really at work. VITEX HAIR INSTITUTE has prepared its tested products so that everyone can use them at home and enjoy their benefits. So easy to use . . . no attendant is necessary for result-getting applications.

11 Here you see the trained operator putting on the finishing touches and now the scalp is clean . . . and the correct step to prevent excessive falling hair has been taken.

12 To top off the treatment, VITEX'S CORRECTIVE POMADE is used. This Pomade contains precious ingredients that are helpful and aid in speeding up the reconditioning that is so much desired.

ANNIE OAKLEY

A WESTERN FACT SHORT

ALL the quick-trigger, two-gun men of the West had to take their hats off to a woman, not only because of her sex, but also because she out-triggered all of them. This woman was Annie Oakley, without doubt the greatest marksman of either sex ever to have lived.

A fact known to very few people is that there were two Annie Oakleys. One was the original Annie Oakley and the other was her understudy and protege, Mrs. Frank E. Butler, born in Woodland, Ohio, Aug. 13, 1866. The fact that Annie Oakley who became world famous in show business was really a team of women sharpshooters has resulted in no end of confusion on the part of historians.

Another contributing factor to this confusion was the original Annie Oakley's modesty. She kept her private life secluded and sheltered and entirely removed from the show business that meant her livelihood. Interviewers seeking the original Annie Oakley usually found themselves talking to Mrs. Butler. Mrs. Butler was not always able to give the correct answers to interrogators, so rather garbled data relating to Annie Oakley was the result.

There was hardly an authentic interview with Annie Oakley printed up to 1926 for, in that year, Mrs. Butler died in Dayton, Ohio, and the original Annie Oakley, then living on Long Island, was forced to greet interviewers in person.

In the later years Annie Oakley came to realize that she was a personage of historic importance, linked fatefully with Western Americana and tradition. She did much to clear the confusion and straighten out the data concerning her life but there was still a modest, retiring and reticent quirk to her nature that caused her to shun publicity as much as possible. She did, however, consent to make known certain facts to representatives of historical societies. It is on this material and on earlier facts given out by Col. William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) that historians must rely for any true account of her life and exploits.

The historic United States Army Indian War scout, Col. William F. Cody, who was to win world fame as Buffalo Bill, the Buffalo huntsman and later Wild West showman, was the closest friend Annie Oakley ever had. She was the star feature of his Wild West show for many seasons and he had for her an affection as deep as any father for a daughter. He had a pet name for her; it was "Little Missie."

Little Missie was not strong enough to endure all the rigors of circus trooping and to appear at every performance. This accounts for the ferreting out and engaging of Mrs. Butler as an understudy, assistant and alternative. There was also a real scientific reason. The work was of a nature very trying on the nerves. For her expert—or should we say perfect marksmanship—Miss Oakley needed iron nerve and her nerves, at no time, could be the least bit jaded. Any

(Continued on page 123)

Vitex HAIR Institute Home Treatment Offer

Get TRIPLE ACTION HAIR Conditioner On Approval or No Cost!

This sensational and unusual offer is made to out-of-towners who find it inconvenient to visit our Fifth Avenue Treatment Salon. No matter where you live, you can now use the same products we have successfully used here at the Institute without risking a single cent. You must be satisfied or your money back in full. VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER will help to stop scalp itch, excessive dandruff and help promote normal hair growth. VITEX'S HAIR CONDITIONER helps promote three important hair benefits.

1. Stimulates Growth Areas: After applying Conditioner, you will note a pleasant tingling or "drawing" sensation. Evidence of how effectively your scalp is being stimulated in the areas where blood must nourish the hair roots.

2. Helps dispel dandruff, stops itching. Effective in dissolving accumulated waste matter that strangles the hair and causes irritation by clogging up the follicle "funnels." Thus the Conditioner quickly helps create correct conditions for healthful and natural growth.

3. Purifies as it cleanses. After you have allowed the CONDITIONER to "work" as directed, it saponifies easily with water and rinses completely clear, leaving the scalp healthfully clean and the hair naturally brilliant.

Social and business success is often dependent upon a healthy head of hair. Use VITEX'S Conditioner to help Preserve Your Hair. Keep young looking.

VITEX'S CONDITIONER and POMADE are used by women, too, to help keep their hair youthful, vibrant and fresh looking.

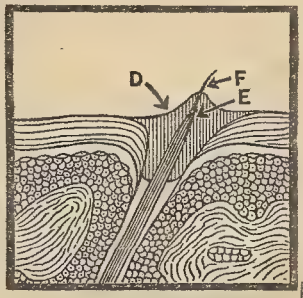
Use It At Once To Help Recondition Your Scalp So Your Hair Can Grow

There are fourteen local causes of baldness, any one of which might be attacking your hair growing area. If your condition of excessive falling hair is caused by one of these enemies of hair growth, use VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER to help clear up your scalp and rid it of foreign matter that interferes with normal hair growth.

VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER is a concentrate, consisting of carefully selected and entirely harmless ingredients, exactly prepared and compounded to create and maintain a healthy scalp condition that will be conducive to the natural continued growth of hair. It does not contain alcohol which is harmful, because it tends to dry up the natural oil. It is the same product used with amazing success in our Fifth Avenue Treatment Salon. . . VITEX'S CONDITIONER for the Hair and Scalp is the result of over 30 years' experience, study and application. It must be good!

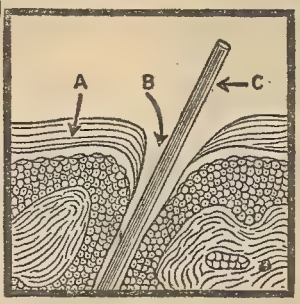
GUARANTEE

You do not risk a cent using VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION HAIR CONDITIONER. You must be satisfied or your money back in full, after 10 days trial.



Save The Roots and Save HAIR

The highly magnified cross section (see top cut at left) shows that either clogged up follicles keep choking it back or else poor circulation prevents hair from growing through with the necessary degree for hair health. When hair is strong and healthy a cross section reveals (see bottom cut) a clean, loose and well lubricated scalp. Use VITEX'S CONDITIONER.



Read What Users Say!

A BARBER WRITES
One of my customers bought a bottle to try on his hair. Already I have given him 3 treatments. We have no proof if will make hair grow but in 36 yrs. of barbering it is the first time I'm convinced that your conditioner will stop hair from falling.
S. B. A., Fresno, Calif.

FRIEND RECOMMENDS
My friend uses your conditioner for his hair and it seems to help him, so he told me that he thinks it will help me also. I would deeply appreciate your opinion and I'm enclosing $3 for a large 16 oz. bottle.
B. E. R., Westfield, Mass.

DECIDED IMPROVEMENT
Enclosed find check in amount of $3, for which send the 16 oz. size. In March issue of "Click" I noticed various pictures pertaining to VITEX'S Conditioner and decided I would try same. I sent for $1 size, and, much to my amazement, after using it was quite satisfied. There is a decided improvement in my hair and others have noticed it. Words can't express my thanks for your wonderful discovery.
W. G., Chicago, Ill.

FIRST BOTTLE SHOWS IMPROVEMENT
I have received your trial bottle and am using it according to instructions. About ten days ago I started massaging my scalp morning and evening. It seems to me that my hair started looking much better and the short thinning hair seemed to be growing some.
P. L., Vandalia, Ill.

Recondition Your HAIR While It's There. . . ACT NOW!

Men and women who are anxious to stop excessive hair loss and help correct local scalp disorders, should order VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER at once. A leading magazine thought enough of the Vitex Method to give it a two page pictorial story in their March 1939 issue. Prove to yourself that VITEX'S CONDITIONER can help you. A special 8 treatment size costs only $1.00. Not sold in stores. Only obtainable direct from us.

8 TREATMENT SIZE ONLY $1.00

Send today and receive an eight treatment bottle of VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER for only $1.00 Sent anywhere upon receipt of price or C.O.D. with a money back guarantee if not satisfied.

$5.00 WORTH FOR $3.00

To save money and help speed up results, order this special $3. combination. A 16 oz. size of VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER (4 times the quantity) is regularly $3.00. Order this and we include a 1 oz. $1. size of **VITEX'S CORRECTIVE POMADE** free. You save $2. and you really should have the POMADE because it is used daily and helps speed up results. **RUSH THE COUPON TODAY, CHECKING OFFER DESIRED.**

FREE SCALP EXAMINATION

If you live in New York or expect to visit World's Fair, you are invited to visit our Fifth Avenue Treatment Salon. A hair and scalp expert will gladly give you a free scalp examination. Many New York Business Leaders (Ladies too) visit here regularly to benefit from these personal scalp treatments.

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I accept your special offer. Enclosed find $1.00. Send me the 8 treatment size of VITEX'S HAIR AND SCALP TRIPLE-ACTION CONDITIONER postpaid in plain wrapper. If not satisfied with results, I will return unused portion within ten days for full refund.

☐ I enclose $3.00. Send large Economy Size of VITEX'S CONDITIONER postpaid, and include free a 1 oz. jar of daily CORRECTIVE POMADE.

☐ Ship order checked above C.O.D. I will pay postage.

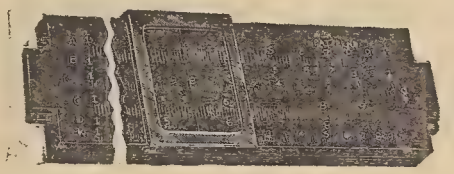
Name.....

Address.....

NOTE—Canadian and foreign orders must be accompanied by cash.

A PROFESSIONAL SLIDE RULE

Practical, Educational, Time Saver



Features: Nickel Silver framed indicator with integral friction springs. Scales calibrated directly on well-seasoned wood. Retains accuracy regardless of temperature or humidity changes. Instructions and illustrations of primary operations clearly printed on reverse side of rule for ready reference or teaching. Each rule with a durable pocket carrying case for convenience and protection.

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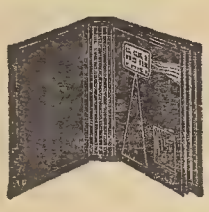
JIFFY

MAGAZINE BINDERS



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No. 3. 8½"x6¼", with 3-inch back, for Readers' Digest, etc.....$1.00

P. P. prepaid in U. S. and Canada.

M. L. SALES COMPANY
Room 315
160 W. Broadway, New York City
10

(Continued from page 116)

grin. "You killed the two bandits, and laid Gaskins out cold with a slug along his scalp. Our banker friend's gonna have a hard time explaining how the Bar L man got salivated with a .38 bullet seeing as everybody else was using .45's. We got the gent out in the street, and he's talked considerable. Yes sir, Tumalo's gonna be a right peaceful place now."

"Don't worry about Miles City," Jean said softly, "Ed wired up there, and the man that testified against you is dead. The sheriff says for you to come up, and there probably won't even be a trial."

"And when I get back?" Slim's gaze was on the girl.

"I'll be here," she smiled.

"You're a lucky jasper," Ed grinned.

There was something in the girl's eyes that told Slim he was lucky, that the dream he'd had in his heart would become a reality.

"I reckon I am, Ed," he said.

NEURITIS Relieve Pain in Few Minutes *or Money Back*

To relieve the torturing pain of Neuritis, Rheumatism, Neuralgia or Lumbago in a few minutes, get NURITO, the fine formula, used by thousands. No opiates. Does the work quickly—must relieve cruel pain to your satisfaction in a few minutes—or your money back. Don't suffer. Don't delay. Ask your druggist today for trustworthy NURITO on this guarantee.

Always look for the
BLUE RIBBON

A BLUE RIBBON MAGAZINE

before buying your Magazine

(Continued from page 120)
great strain on her nerves might have meant the loss, for all time, of the perfect mental, ocular and bodily cordination that made her the world's wonder marksman not only of her time but of all time.

It is most interesting that Mrs. Butler, the assistant to Miss Oakley, was little less skillful as a marksman than was Annie Oakley and that both were more expert and proficient than Buffalo Bill who held all male records and honors.

Twice daily, for years, Col. Cody with one or the other of these women, usually Annie Oakley, herself, went through a marksmanship routine that has never been equalled. It is even more extraordinary, when it is considered that their arms were the earlier rifles and pistols, much less perfect than those manufactured today.

The Indians, among whom were some of the most expert marksmen ever to have lived, all admitted inferiority to Annie Oakley, except with bow and arrow. The best of these Indian performers were with Buffalo Bill's show and they looked upon Annie Oakley as a goddess and an angel. Among Indian tribes, even today, no white woman ever shared the renown of Annie Oakley.

Among the feats performed by Annie Oakley and never since equalled was one on which hangs a most interesting tale. Miss Oakley shooting backwards from a hand-mirror-reflected image at a distance of 200 yards could shoot out all the spots in a ten-of-hearts playing card. Every heart would be punctured exactly dead center. Some of these cards are still in existence and micrometric measurements show deviations of hardly a thousandth of an inch.

FALSE TEETH
Perfect Fit or Money Returned

$6.50 From YOUR OWN mouth impression. As low as $6.50. Our own new method insures real fit and comfort. The perfect order-by-mail method. Long wearing TRIAL (90 days). EVERY CENT REFUNDED if fit is not PERFECT. You be the judge.

90 Days' Trial

PROOF "Like my Sta-Tite plates fine They are a perfect fit" Mrs. McGinn, Okla.

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With this new Comb-A-Trim you can remove excess hair on neck and temples quickly and easily . . . and save on barber bills! Just run Comb-A-Trim through your hair like ordinary comb. Cuts smoothly! No Experience Needed! Can be used by man or woman, boy or girl! We do not say you can give yourself a complete Haircut with the Comb-A-Trim. We do say you can trim neatly and cut down your visits to the barber. In one month, Comb-A-Trim will save you it's low cost. After that Comb-A-Trim will serve you long and economically! Try it at Our Expense! If not delighted, return it in 10 days and your money will be refunded immediately! Send 35c with your order Today! We ship your COMB-A-TRIM by return mail with instructions.
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FREE! With every Super Magic Wand Welder you get kit of welding supplies, Bronze, steel and aluminum welding rods; welding flux, pair of genuine "Protectosite" glare-proof goggles. Also complete instruction papers, and money-making ideas! All for $2.98. Satisfaction Guaranteed or Money Refunded Immediately. We ship by RETURN MAIL. Rush your orders today!
☐ Send C.O.D. plus postage. ☐ I enclose $2.98 Ship Postpaid
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WEAR THEM, TEST THEM, EXAMINE THEM for BEAUTY, FIT AND COMFORT. MY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE gives you 3 months to see how they fit and look. I am a dentist of 30 YEARS' EXPERIENCE. I supervise the making of your plates from start to finish. SEND NO MONEY

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SUPERIOR MATCH PANTS COMPANY

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WOODSTOCK TYPEWRITERS

NEW FRIENDS! Pix Letter Club, Box 2655. Sacramento, California

(Continued from page 123)

That she could see the spots on the card at all seems incredible considering the shooting distance. It is also a most remarkable attest of her altogether abnormal eyesight. Even in her declining years, on Long Island, it is said Miss Oakley never resorted to any artificial ocular aid. There was a brief dimness in her vision in her forty-ninth year. She did not resort to glasses but only to prayer, her friends say, and she gained her second sight after eleven months.

Now here is the funny little story about those tens-of-hearts perforated by bullets from Miss Oakley's rifle. It is the story of how come all free tickets and passes in show business are known as Annie Oakleys. The ten-spots were naturally full of holes and so are all free tickets and passes. The passes have to be punched when issued, when reserved seats are assigned, and by manager, treasurer and ticket-taker. In some cases they are punched twice by all hands to distinguish them from other punched tickets such as employes' gate checks. They are "shot full of holes" and resemble nothing more than one of Annie Oakley's ten-spots.

The original Annie Oakley was a real pioneer woman of the West. Her father and mother emigrated to Dodge City, Kansas, when that town was a trading point for the prairie schooner traffic. Bill Oakley ran up a herd of cattle from four cows he brought west from Missouri. He lived north of Dodge and his range extended into Nebraska. Annie was born in Lincoln, Nebr., when her mother and father had gone there on a trip to sell a number of steers out of their herd.

Little Annie Oakley learned to shoot from her father and his cowboys when she was just a tot. She also became one of the world's most proficient horsewomen under the same tutelage, but it was as a pistol and rifle shot that she especially excelled.

She was beautiful, blonde and shapely but quite petite for a plainswoman. Outside of riding and shooting she is said to have taken little interest in the business of ranching. She had muscles of drawn wire, nerves of steel and the telescopic eyes of an eagle, nevertheless, she was not possessed of the rugged strength and endurance of most pioneer women of the West. Like many great geniuses she tired easily. She was given to spells of severe headaches which might have resulted from the constant straining of her eyesight.

Word of a ranch girl who could "shoot out both eyes of a flying pigeon before the bird dropped to earth" came from the camp-fire chatter of Buffalo Bill's Ogalallah Sioux Indians. He had his agents run the yarn to earth and located the petite and beautiful Annie Oakley.

Buffalo Bill visited Annie personally and greeted her with the challenge that no woman in the world could out-shoot him with either rifle or six-gun.

"All right," said the girlish Annie, "if you think you're so smart, you ride ahead of me on a horse with a basket full of crabapples. Ride as fast as you can and throw the apples in the air, one at a time, as fast as you can. I'll ride after you and hit every apple in mid-air with a rifle bullet."

Speaking of moving targets this

(Continued on page 126)

GUARANTEED TIRES!
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29x4.50-20	2.35	1.05
30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
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29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
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32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

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Size	Tires	Tubes
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32x4	2.95	1.25
33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
32x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES (High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
33x5	4.95	1.75
34x5	4.75	2.25
32x6	7.95	2.95
36x6	9.95	4.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
34x7	$10.95	$4.65
36x7	10.95	4.65
33x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
8.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
8.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65
9.75-20	12.95	6.45

ALL OTHER SIZES

DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—

PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.

Dept. 30 S. Michigan Av., Dept. DIP-12 Chicago, Ill.

Quit Using Tobacco!

Write for Free Booklet and Learn How. Results Guaranteed or Money Refunded.

NEWELL PHARMACAL COMPANY
70 Clayton Station, St. Louis, Mo.

100,000 Satisfied Users

SONG POEMS

WANTED At Once! Mother, Home, Love, Patriotic, Sacred, Comic or any subject. Don't delay—send us your original poem today for immediate consideration.

RICHARD BROS., 147 Woods Bldg., CHICAGO, ILL.

GET A GOVERNMENT JOB

START

$1260 to $2100 Year

Thousands Appointments each year. Get ready at once. Men—Women. Mail Coupon today sure.

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. N216 Rochester, N. Y.

Sirs: Rush to me, without charge (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government jobs. (2) Tell me immediately how to qualify for one of these examinations.

Name .....

Address .....

FREE SAMPLES OF REMARKABLE TREATMENT FOR

Stomach Ulcers

Due to Gastric Hyper-Acidity

H. H. Bromley of Rutland, Vt., writes: "I suffered for 10 years with acid stomach troubles. Doctors all told me I had ulcers and would have to diet the rest of my life. Before taking your treatment I weighed 148 pounds and could eat nothing but soft foods and milk. Now, after taking Von's Tablets, I weigh 171 pounds, can eat almost anything and feel perfectly well." If you suffer from indigestion, gastritis, heartburn, bloating or any other stomach trouble due to gastric hyper-acidity, you too, should try Von's for prompt relief. Send at once for FREE Samples of this wonderful treatment and details of guaranteed trial offer. Instructive Booklet is included. Write

PHILADELPHIA VON CO. Dept. 641-F
Fox Bldg., Philadelphia, Pa.

MYSTERIOUS DEVICE WELDS BRAZES AND SOLDERS
ANYONE CAN OPERATE

Now, an electric welding, brazing and soldering Torch, complete with power unit, goggles and supplies. **Works INSTANTLY off any light socket.** Does a thousand and one repair jobs at amazingly LOW COST on aluminum, iron, steel and other metals. **Indispensable** for Auto, Body and Fender Repairs, and home repairs—shop, factory, farm, engineer, janitor, sheet metal, radio and bicycle repairs. Anyone can handle without previous experience with our simple instructions. **10-DAY HOME TRIAL**
Write at once for Special Introductory Low Price Offer. Try 3 in 1 Electric Torch for 10 days at our risk, or get one free by helping to introduce it. ELECTRO-TORCH CO., 2613-EM Michigan Ave., Chicago

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady. Cabin. Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once.
Get details immediately
RAYSON SERVICE BUREAU, D-53, DENVER, COLO.

WE BUY OLD STAMPS

Cash money for old U. S. stamps available. We pay up to $1,000 for certain U. S. stamps. Look in old trunks and attics. Ask your friends for their old letters. Send 10c in coin or unused U. S. stamps for illustrated Buying Guide.

PARK STAMP COMPANY
9 South Clinton St., Chicago, Illinois

Free For Asthma

If you suffer with those terrible attacks of Asthma at this season of the year; if you choke and gasp for breath don't fail to send at once for a free trial of a remarkable method. No matter where you live nor what your age or occupation, nor whether you have any faith in any remedy under the Sun, send for this free trial. It will cost you nothing. Write now and test the method free on your own case. Address:

Frontier Asthma Co., 810-D Frontier Bldg.,
462 Niagara Street, Buffalo, N. Y.

(Continued from page 125)

appears to be about the ultimate, or something. Both horses would be in wild and rapid motion, the crabapples, a small target at best, would be in motion and the air over the prairie, which air radiates visibly in summer, also would be in motion.

Buffalo Bill took up the contest in great delight, expectancy and a little doubt but Annie hit every apple. Buffalo Bill tried it after her and missed a couple of the targets. He engaged Annie Oakley for his Wild West show, on the spot. Her salary from the first was the highest Buffalo Bill had ever paid a woman performer.

In the show they substituted gaily tinted gelatin balls for the crabapples and an Indian rode ahead and tossed the targets into the air. Annie never missed but Col. Cody and later Mrs. Butler always missed a couple or more times, even after years and years of repeating the stunt twice daily.

Of the life of Annie Oakley, outside of her uncanny marksmanship, there is little of the adventure that characterizes the life of most plainswomen. Her early life was spent among the cowboys and Indians of the plains. Her adult life was spent trooping with Buffalo Bill and her closing years as a staid householder on Long Island.

She was quiet, sedate, sweet and friendly. In her closing years she held open house at her home for old-time circus and show people. Her delight was to entertain a few of these old friends. Among her occasional guests were some of the world's most famous show people. Among her close friends were the Will Rogers and Fred Stone families.

FISTULA

Anyone suffering from Fistula, Piles or Non-Malignant Rectal trouble is urged to write for our FREE Book, describing the McCleary Treatment for these insidious rectal troubles. The McCleary Treatment has been successful in thousands of cases. Let us send you our reference list of former patients living in every State in the Union. The McCleary Clinic, 1025 Elms Blvd., Excelsior Springs, Mo.

SELL SUITS ON OUR EASY CREDIT PLAN

FREE SUITS and Pants given as Bonus
Besides Large Cash Profits, Premiums and Gifts.

Sell only (5) suits to get a FREE SUIT. No limit to number of FREE garments you may earn. Wholesale Prices $15.99 and up. Sample line FREE. No experience needed to make easy sales. All garments individually cut and tailored to measure. Satisfaction or money-back guarantee.

SQUARE DEAL TAILORING CO., Inc.
316 W. VAN BUREN ST., Dept. FK, CHICAGO, ILL.

$100 a Month Sick Benefit Policy at Special Low Cost

When sick you don't want pity, you want pay. You can now be independent, safe, secure, well provided for though disabled.

A sick benefit policy paying up to $100 a month, at special low cost, is now issued by National Protective Insurance Co., nationally famous for their $3.65 accident policy.

The National Protective is the only company issuing a health policy covering any and every disease and paying such large benefits at this low cost.

SEND NO MONEY

They will mail you this sick benefit policy covering any and all diseases, free for inspection without obligation. No application to fill out and no medical examination. Men ages 18 to 69 and women 18 to 59—in all occupations—who are now in good health are eligible. Just send your name, age, address and sex to the National Protective Insurance Co., 3036 Pickwick Bldg., Kansas City, Mo. today. Write them while their special low cost offer is still in effect.

MAKE MORE MONEY taking orders for Shirts, Ties, Underwear, Hosiery, Pajamas, Uniforms, Sweaters, Raincoats, Pants, Jackets, Coveralls, etc. No experience—No investment required. Sales equipment FREE. Write
NIMROD, 4922-EE, Lincoln Ave., Chicago

MEN! SENSATIONAL NOVELTIES

Hulla Dancers, Whoopee Cushions, Balloons, etc. 25c brings samples. Perfect goods in Deluxe Package $4.00 per gross, delivered. Send for free wholesale catalogue of fast-selling items.
ATEX NOVELTY CO., Dept. DA.2, Box 231, Hamilton, Ont.

IS EPILEPSY INHERITED? CAN IT BE CURED?

A booklet containing the opinions of famous doctors on this interesting subject will be sent FREE, while they last, to any reader writing to the Educational Division.
535 Fifth Avenue, Dept. DB10, New York, N.Y.

MEN Wanted as agents to sell Drug Stores, Razor Blades, 40c per hundred. Large size Tooth Paste and Shaving Cream, $1 a dozen, etc. Send for free price list on other merchandise. KEYSTONE RUBBER CO., Dept. D. 36, 5th Ave., New York City.

CAN YOU WRITE A SONG OR SONG POEM?
No Charge for
Radio Presentation or Publication!
Send Large Stamped Self-Addressed Envelope or 4c in Stamps for full particulars.
NORMAN SPENCER & SON, Music Publishers
Studio DA-10, 145 West 45th St., N. Y. City
Do Not Send Songs—Write First Plainly

THE EASY WAY TO POPULARITY

Here is a complete education for just a few cents. Amazes your friends and astound the girls at parties and dances. Be able to protect yourself.

Swing Steps
Complete guide to swing dancing.

How to Be a Detective
Criminal code and G-man methods — Complete and scientific Crime detection.

How to Dance
The new guide for self-instruction in the latest steps from square dancing to swing waltz.

Tip Top Tapping
Simplified lessons in Tap dancing, for men and women.

Police Jiu Jitsu
As taught to police, Marines, "G" men, Soldiers.

Scientific Boxing
Includes Diet, fight training, K. O. punching, Ring Rules and ring history. Illustrated with slow motion movie strips.

Get These Profusely Illustrated Books at the Special Price Of:

35¢ each — 3 for $1.00 — or 6 for $1.75

M. L. SALES CO., Dept. 10,
Room 315, 160 W. Broadway, N. Y. C.
I Enclose $..... for which please send me the following books (check those you want).

- ☐ Tip Top Tapping
- ☐ How to be a Detective
- ☐ How to Dance
- ☐ Swing Steps
- ☐ Police Jiu Jitsu
- ☐ Scientific Boxing

NAME .....
ADDRESS .....

The Money Making Marvel of the Age!

PICTURE RING SELLS TO EVERYONE!

SAMPLE RING From Any Photo You Send Only 48¢

Hand Tinted in Natural Life Like Colors, 10c Extra

It's here! The hottest, most sensational, most gripping selling idea of the age! THE PICTURE RING — the ring men and women everywhere, rich and poor, young and old want to wear and keep their whole lives long. Why? Because on this beautiful ring is permanently reproduced any photograph, snapshot or picture of some loved one. Yes — reproduced clearly and sharply and made part of the ring itself so it can't rub off, come off or fade off. This sensational new idea is making an unbelievable hit. Men and women—even those without an hour's selling experience—are taking dozens of orders a day and making dollars of profit by the handful. And now, in your territory, YOU can cash in big, every day, with this exciting sure-fire profit-maker and earn money so easily, it will seem more like play than work.

SELLS TO EVERYONE!

A Treasure Remembrance Its Value Beyond Price!

Once women carried pictures of their loved ones in lockets; and men carried them in watch cases. Those days are gone, but the desire to carry the portrait of a loved one is as strong as ever. Not until the amazing secret process for transferring pictures to rings was discovered, was it possible to revive this grand old custom and to satisfy the hunger of every human being to express again this grandest of all sentiments. How mothers and fathers will welcome this opportunity to wear a ring with the most precious setting of all—a picture of their beloved child. How happy every man and woman will be to keep alive the memory of a departed one by carrying with them always, night and day, this beautiful Picture Ring.

Order Your Sample Ring Now! You Don't Risk a Penny!

Never before has anything like this come your way. No competition from anyone—no looking for prospects (they are all around you)—no carrying a big stock or putting any money into goods. Simply showing your sample ring a few times a day, if you only start with your friends and neighbors, will be enough to give you an endless chain of orders. We cut away all red tape and are ready to send you a SAMPLE RING at sensationally low special wholesale price of only 48c. The minute you take it out of its beautiful Gift Box you are ready to go after the orders. Rush the coupon below for YOUR sample ring NOW! That's all the outfit you need. It will do all your selling for you. And we make it easy for you to obtain this sample ABSOLUTELY FREE OF A PENNY COST under our liberal offer.

PICTURE RING CO.
DEPT. F-45 12TH & JACKSON STREET CINCINNATI OHIO

Beautiful Permanent Picture Ring Made From Any Photo or Picture

For only $1.00 retail—look what you offer! A made-to-measure onyx-like ring adorned with the most precious setting in the world—a reproduction of the picture of a loved one. The ring itself can't tarnish. It will wear forever with ordinary care. The picture of the loved one is clearly, sharply reproduced with surprising faithfulness and becomes an inseparable part of the ring. It can't wear off, rub off, or fade off.

Make Pockets Full of Dollars Just Wearing Ring!

Can you imagine a more novel, more unusual gift than the Picture Ring? How can any man or woman find a more beautiful way to express loving sentiment than giving a wife, a child, a parent, a friend, a sweetheart a Picture Ring with the donor's portrait expertly reproduced! What a surprise! 10 orders a day is an easy goal—20 orders a day are not too much to expect.

SEND NO MONEY!

Hundreds of customers write they wouldn't take a fortune for their rings if they couldn't get others. $5.00 and even $10.00 would be a small price for the PICTURE RING—but as a special offer we send you the beautiful PICTURE RING, made from any photo or picture you send for only 48c! Don't wait. Rush the coupon at once for the sample ring on our NO RISK plan and see for yourself what a whirl-wind money maker this is for you. ACT RIGHT NOW!

MOTHER HUSBAND BABY

SEND YOUR RING SIZE NOW

PICTURE RING CO.,
Dept. F-45,
12th and Jackson Sts.,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

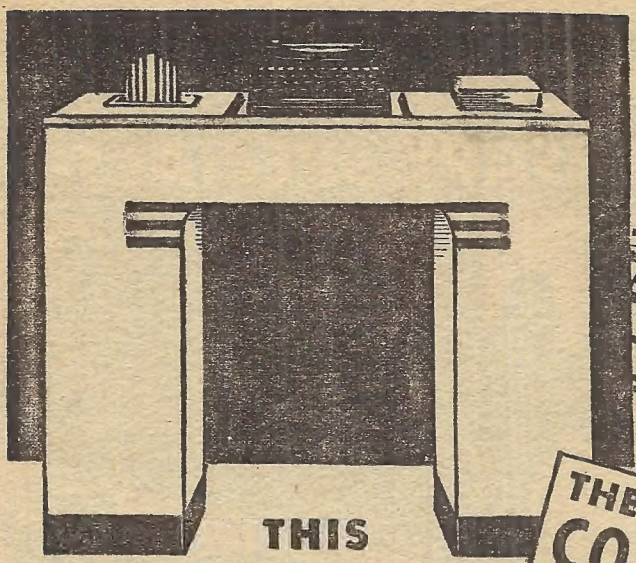
RING SIZE .....

Enclosed is photo. Please rush my individually made Picture Ring and starting equipment. Will pay postman 48c plus few cents postage. It is understood that if I am not entirely satisfied I can return ring within 5 days and you will refund my money in full.

Hand Tinted in Natural Life Like Colors. 10c Extra

Name .....
Address .....
City ..... State .....

YOUR RING SIZE: Wrap strip of paper around second joint of finger, trim to end and, measure strip down from top as here shown. Number at end is your size.



ACT NOW!

ON THIS BARGAIN OFFER.

THE COMBINATION FOR AS LITTLE AS 10c A DAY

How easy it is to pay for this combination. Just imagine! A small good will deposit and terms as low as 10c a day to get this combination at once. You will never miss 10c a day. Become immediately the possessor of this combination. You assume no obligation by sending the coupon.

THIS BEAUTIFUL DESK FOR ONLY $1.00

WITH ANY

REMINGTON PORTABLE TYPEWRITER

A beautiful desk in a neutral blue-green—trimmed in black and silver—made of sturdy fibre board—now available for only one dollar ($1.00) to purchasers of a Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable Typewriter. The desk is so light that it can be moved anywhere without trouble. It will hold six hundred (600) pounds. This combination gives you a miniature office at home. Mail the coupon today.

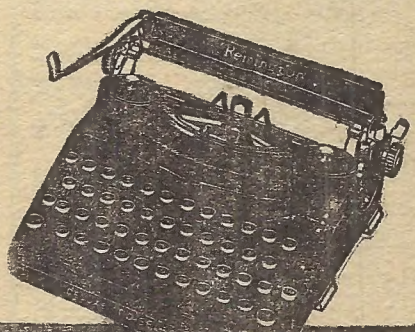
THESE EXTRAS FOR YOU

LEARN TYPING FREE

To help you even further, you get Free with this special offer a 24-page booklet, prepared by experts, to teach you quickly how to typewrite by the touch method. When you buy a Noiseless you get this free Remington Rand gift that increases the pleasure of using your Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable. Remember, the touch typing book is sent Free while this offer holds.

SPECIAL CARRYING CASE

The Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable is light in weight, easily carried about. With this offer Remington supplies a beautiful carrying case sturdily built of 3-ply wood bound with a special Dupont Fabric.



SPECIFICATIONS

ALL ESSENTIAL FEATURES of large standard office machines appear in the Noiseless Deluxe Portable—standard 4-row keyboard; back spacer; margin stops and margin release; double shift key; two color ribbon and automatic reverse; variable line spacer; paper fingers; makes as many as seven carbons; takes paper 9.5″ wide; writes lines 8.2″ wide, black key cards and white letters, rubber cushioned feet.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

The Remington Noiseless Deluxe Portable Typewriter is sold on a trial basis with a money-back guarantee. If, after ten days trail, you are not entirely satisfied, we will take it back, paying all shipping charges and refunding your good will deposit at once. You take no risk.

SEND COUPON NOW!

Remington Rand Inc. Dept 164-10
465 Washington St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Tell me, without obligation, how to get a Free Trial of a new Remington Noiseless Deluxe Portable, including Carrying Case and Free Typing Booklet, for as little as 10c a day. Send Catalogue.

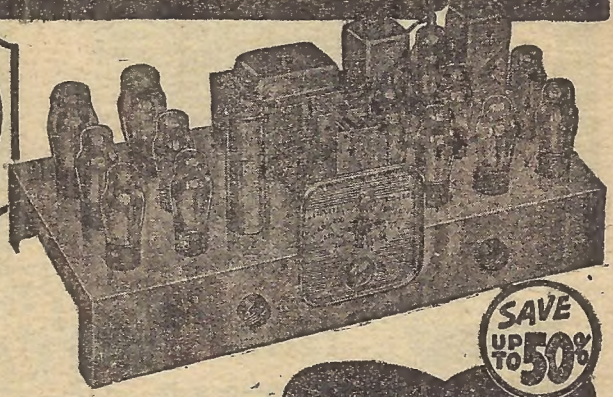
Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

1940 MIDWEST FACTORY-TO-YOU 20th ANNIVERSARY SPECIALS!

WITH TELEVISION ADAPTATION



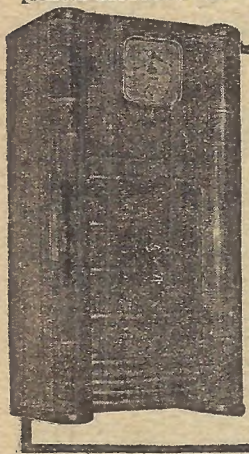
14-TUBE POWERFUL MIDWEST

SAVE UP TO 50%

COMPLETE CHASSIS Only $19.95 WITH TUBES AND SPEAKER

PUT THIS CHASSIS IN YOUR PRESENT CABINET

HERE is what we believe is today's biggest radio value—the 1940 TELEVISION-ADAPTED Midwest. Not since 1920, when this firm was established, have we been able to offer you such a bargain. Now, you can enjoy the mighty power of 14 latest type tubes—plus an advanced circuit—plus advanced features—plus astonishing foreign performance—plus TELEVISION ADAPTATION—for little more than the cost of new tubes—and on 30 days trial in your own home.



14-TUBE CONSOLE only $29.95 COMPLETE

HERE IS THE BARGAIN OF THE YEAR—a 14-tube radio complete with console, at a price you would ordinarily pay for a 7 or 10-tube set.

This "Twentieth Anniversary", designed - for - tomorrow radio is offered you at a sensationally low factory-to-you price—making it possible for you to modernize your old radio—with an "up-to-the-minute" model—to be prepared for the developments of tomorrow.

The many advantages and features which characterize this 1940 radio result in unusual naturalness of tone realism, in amazingly faithful reproduction, in unusual sensitivity, and hair-line selectivity. But don't just take our word for it — write for the new 1940 "Twentieth Anniversary" catalog. See for yourself the features and advantages of this and many other radios in the new 1940 TELEVISION-ADAPTED Midwest line. See for yourself why only Midwest offers Organ-Fonic Tone Filter, Organ Key Tone Control, Anten-A-Scope and other exclusive features on its 17-Tube, 5-Band radios. No installation problem . . . no outside antenna . . . just PLUG-IN and play!

30 DAYS TRIAL

NEW LOW EASY TERMS

LIBERAL TRADE-IN ALLOWANCE UP TO $40.00 FOR YOUR OLD RADIO

The famous Midwest 30-day Trial Plan enables you to try any Midwest radio for 30 days *before* you make up your mind. You can trade in your old set and receive as much as $40.00 trade-in allowance. Tell us the make and age of your present radio—so we can determine how much to allow you on it. Our new Easy-Pay Plan makes it easier than ever before to own a Midwest. Absolute satisfaction guaranteed on a money-back basis. Write today for FREE 1940 "Twentieth Anniversary" catalog.

PASTE COUPON ON 1¢ POSTCARD... OR Write Today!

MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
Dept. 68-A, Cincinnati, Ohio

Send me your new FREE 1940 catalog, complete details of your liberal 30-day Trial Offer. Factory-To-You Wholesale Prices, and big TRADE-IN Offer.

Name.....
(PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)
Address.....
Town..... State.....
User-Agents Make Easy Extra Money. Check ☐ Here for details.

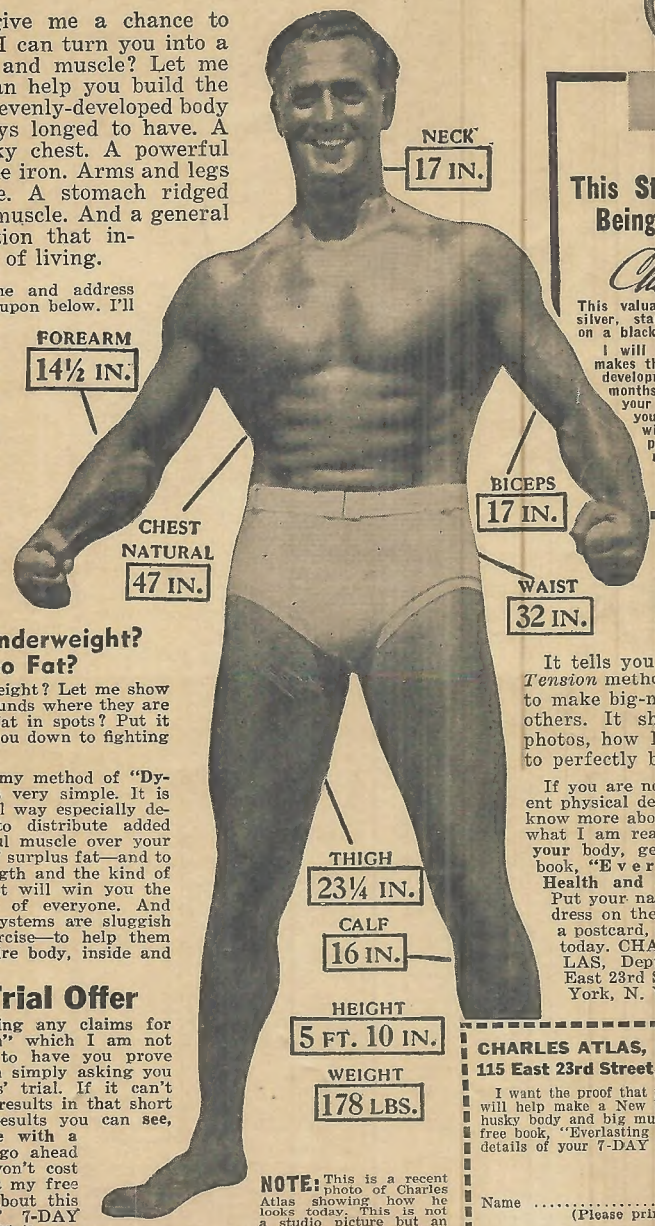
MIDWEST (Factory-to-You) RADIOS

DEPT. 68-A, MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION...CINCINNATI, OHIO, U.S.A.
Manufacturers of Quality Radios Since 1920

"Give Me Your Measure and Let Me Prove I Can Make You a NEW MAN!"

WILL you give me a chance to prove that I can turn you into a man of might and muscle? Let me prove that I can help you build the kind of strong, evenly-developed body you have always longed to have. A big, deep, husky chest. A powerful back. Biceps like iron. Arms and legs that never tire. A stomach ridged with bands of muscle. And a general physical condition that increases the fun of living.

Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It reveals the secrets of "Dynamic Tension" that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title of "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers!



NOTE: This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away by *Charles Atlas*

This valuable cup, made of sterling silver, stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base.

I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months. Therefore, no matter what your measurements may be now, you have an equal chance to win this cup for permanent possession—and with YOUR name engraved on it!

Get my free book by mailing coupon below!

48-PAGE BOOK FREE

It tells you all about my *Dynamic Tension* method, and what it has done to make big-muscled men of so many others. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed pupils to perfectly balanced proportions.

If you are not satisfied with your present physical development—if you want to know more about "Dynamic Tension" and what I am ready to prove it can do for your body, get my free book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** Put your name and address on the coupon or a postcard, and mail it today. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 4K, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

Are You Underweight? Or Too Fat?

Are you underweight? Let me show you how to add pounds where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? Put it up to me to pare you down to fighting trim.

The purpose of my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** is very simple. It is an entirely natural way especially developed by me—to distribute added pounds of powerful muscle over your body—to get rid of surplus fat—and to give you the strength and the kind of physical build that will win you the envy and respect of everyone. And for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

7-Day Trial Offer

I am not making any claims for **"Dynamic Tension"** which I am not perfectly willing to have you prove for yourself. I am simply asking you to give it 7 days' trial. If it can't show you enough results in that short period of time—results you can **see, feel, and measure with a tape**—then don't go ahead with it—and it won't cost you one cent! Get my free book telling all about this "prove-it-yourself" 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER. Mail coupon at once.

MAIL COUPON FOR FREE BOOK NOW!

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 4K,
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of Dynamic Tension will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," and full details of your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

MEN and WOMEN WANTED for Local Coffee Agencies

Big Value Complete DISPLAY OUTFIT FREE!

NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED...NO WAITING.. ...YOUR EARNINGS START AT ONCE!

NOW!—without sending me one penny!—any reliable man or woman can PROVE the all year 'round money-making opportunities in a simple-to-run Local Coffee Agency. If you are in earnest about wanting to make money—if you want to enjoy the independence of having a simple, profitable little business of your own—I will gladly give you the big, valuable Outfit shown above—FREE. This Complete Free Outfit contains a large assortment of regular full size packages and everything else you need to start making profits your very first day. With my simple, proven Plan, you need absolutely no experience. And you can devote either full time or part time.

Think of it! I give you this highly valuable and complete business equipment FREE! I do not ask you to send me one cent! Certainly, there could be no greater proof of my absolute confidence in the money-making opportunities in this remarkable Plan. If you are an active and reliable man or woman who means business—if you want cash to spend—money to save—the means to live in comfort—I want you to have this big Money-Making Outfit FREE. You start making money **immediately.** Furthermore, I'll extend liberal **credit** so that you can do business on **my capital.**

Be a Food Distributor

Under my simple, sure-fire, proven Plan, you distribute delicious food products and many other daily necessities direct to the home. You make regular calls on your customers, take orders, make deliveries and pocket a big part of every dollar you take in. Your average gross profit is from 30 to 40 cents on the dollar.

The nation-wide success of this Plan is largely due to **the powerful and instant appeal of good things to eat!** There's scarcely a man, woman or child who doesn't love deliciously tempting pies, biscuits, puddings, and other food delights. Wouldn't you like to turn this universal appeal into **cash for yourself?** Wouldn't you like the exclusive right to all the profits waiting to be made in your locality on this nationally famous line? A line that includes, not only these tempting food specialties but also over one hundred other daily household necessities—all fast selling, quick repeating products. Produced and tested in our own pure food kitchens and laboratories, these products are of uniform high quality—guaranteed to satisfy or money back.

Your complete line of food products will also include high quality coffee, teas, spices, flavoring extracts, etc. In addition, you will have an extensive line of marvelous time-and-labor saving laundry and kitchen supplies and many other daily household necessities always in big demand. Attractive and unusual Premium Offers, Cut-Price Sales, One Cent Sales, Prize Contests—make your business a profitable and fascinating all year 'round occupation.

Big Earning Possibilities

I wish you could read the glowing reports I receive. Here are a few: George Cini, New York, reported $73.00 clear profits in one week; H. D. Morris, Virginia, $60.00 in a week; S. D. Moran, California, $19.00 in one day; Phyllis Lyons, Minnesota, $50.00 in one week. I frankly admit that these are unusual earning records, but they show the big money that **has been made** and **can be made** in this business. Of course what you make will depend largely upon yourself and the time you put in.

Your Home Is Your Headquarters

You won't have to rent an office or a store, and you won't have to invest in furniture fixtures or large stocks of goods. Your own home becomes your office.

I Send Everything

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